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MORAL PANIC, NARRATIVITY, AND AGONISTICS

The subject of the article is the analysis of the moral dimension of moral panic. The current research on moral panic is led by two approaches, processual and attributional. However, the moral dimension of moral panic is addressed in both only marginally. We intend to show that analyzing this concept in isolation from its moral dimension gives an incorrect impression that its cognitive and normative aspects may be treated as separate. We believe that the concept of moral panic when abstracted from the language of valuation, loses its theoretical potential. When analyzed across the full spectrum of its actual contexts and from the perspective of moral vocabulary, moral panic retains its theoretical relevance. Since each new form of political hegemony, violence, and other oppressive actions against the subaltern groups often resort to instigating moral panic, the concept can be usefully applied to their analysis and critique.

Keywords: moral panic, narrative, moral regulation, epistemic injustice.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of the article is not so much to revise, reappraise, or reformulate the concept of moral panic, but rather to reaffirm its moral dimension which, in the mainstream analysis, has been largely overlooked or sometimes even intentionally omitted. For this reason, this article aligns especially with the position of C. Critcher (2008; 2009a), who argues that a significant limitation in the current understanding of moral panic is not the lack of tools to explore its attributes, but the failure to recognize it as a form of "moral regulation" and a "discursive event" linked to the ethical dilemmas of political communities (Wright Monod, 2017). Adopting the perspective of moral panic as an instrument of moral regulation, we view this phenomenon as an operational process for managing core normative and moral rules, not only to maintain community cohesion and social stability but also for „the production, reproduction, and transformation of codes for everyday living that legitimize and naturalize different ways of being human" (Valverde 1994, after Hier, 2016). Given the nature of the concept, we propose also to include in the analysis of moral panic the ideas A. MacIntyre and M. Fricker. MacIntyre's social theory and moral philosophy (2007) may help us understand both the nature and functions of this phenomenon. Similarly useful may be the perspective of epistemic injustice introduced by

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Fricker (2007; 2013). Her perspective may serve to unify various facets, dimensions, and practices of moral panic while also encompassing a wide range of topics and research contexts in the debate on the phenomenon.

2. MORALITY AND COMMUNITY

MacIntyre's leading idea is to indicate the relationship between community and tradition. According to his conception, tradition is a set of modes and ways through which members of a given community understand and narrate the practices in which they engage. To put it briefly, the community is the carrier of tradition, and tradition is the guide of the community. Practices are sets of activities established within a given community aimed at achieving various goals, temporal and mundane, but also lasting and significant, serving the survival of the community and contributing to its self-understanding. An important element of MacIntyre's understanding of practice is the awareness of their practical activities. That awareness finds expression in the narratives. "[W]e all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others. Stories are lived before they are told – except in the case of fiction." (MacIntyre, 2007). It is in their narratives that people tell themselves about what they intend to achieve, how they wish to do so, how they succeeded, and also how they failed in their endeavours. It is an important fact that people do not always achieve their intended purpose. Failure may be a failure to observe the moral and practical rules of a community, but also they may mean that the thus-far effective rules of practical action have failed. For a community to survive, it must make an effort to understand why is succeeded thus far and why it now failed. The narratives built with such a task in mind, are an integral part of the tradition of a given community. However, a community is not always able to construct a narrative or a story that would win the approval of all its members. In such circumstances, there emerges a confrontation between the supporters of competing narratives. In fact, MacIntyre claims that such rivalry is constitutive of a given community. A community exists insofar as there is a dispute within it about what the community is to be. "[W]hen a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose" (MacIntyre, 2007). Community is therefore by its very nature agonistic. "A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition." (MacIntyre, 2007). When such an internal dispute abates or dies out, can be seen as evidence of the fading of the sense of identification of the individuals with the community they belong, a sense which thus far has united them. Yet a community may also disintegrate and fall apart when the dispute between opposing factions within it inflames beyond the level that allows them mutually to understand each other or even to communicate.

In his diagnosis of the nature of contemporary moral disagreements, MacIntyre elaborated on their three main features which are pertinent to the discussion of moral panic. First of them is the fact that participants in such debates adopt mutually incommensurable concepts which make it impossible for them to find a common language. The untranslatability and incommensurability of their moral vocabularies are responsible for the "shrill tone of so much [today's] moral debate" (MacIntyre, 2007). The shrillness of such voices demonstrates a deep commitment to given sets of values, and at the same time a sense of helplessness in convincing others to one's belief. The second feature of

contemporary debates is that even though their participants usually present themselves as impersonal and rational, the debates are nothing but "just a clash of antagonistic wills, each will determined by some set of arbitrary choices of its own" (MacIntyre, 2007). The third feature of contemporary disagreements is that each side of the debate seeks to legitimize their mutually "incommensurable premises of the rival arguments deployed in these debates [by] a wide variety of historical [authorities]" (MacIntyre, 2007).

Being an expression of sincere moral concern, such debates, when heightened, may transform this concern into a moral panic. In this way, what begins as a genuine moral issue may deteriorate into moral condemnation and degenerate into mechanisms of manipulation aimed at eliciting obedience and subservience instead of a genuine partner-like argument and dialogue.

The function of moral panic is typically to create emotional pressure on the community by its dominant factions, compelling alignment with their side to maintain control. In this context, moral panic can be viewed as a symptom, deliberate creation and also a product of internal tension within a political community, which threatens to fracture it from within, while also serving as an attempt to prevent such a rupture.

In other words, it is a mechanism of moral regulation. Although this mechanism of manipulation and imposition of one's will on another is well-known and well-diagnosed, it continues to retain its effectiveness. And it is precisely its effectiveness that is the reason why the episodes of moral panic are so frequent and regular in modern societies.

3. EXPLORING MORAL PANIC: KEY LINES OF RESEARCH

The concept of moral panic has been present in the social sciences for over half a century. The term, first introduced by M. McLuhan[3] is well-established as an analytical category, though it was revised, left abandoned, revived, and substituted by more suitable concepts such as, for example, social control or culture wars. Interestingly, it appears that the more the limitations of this concept have been pointed out within academic circles, the more popular it has become in public discourse.

The conventional approach to moral panic refers to a sudden, excessive, and negative concern about particular groups and forms of behaviour perceived as threats to existing, social values and stability, structures of control and order. Within this framework C. Crichter (2008) identifies two main explanatory paths. One of them, which constitutes the first wave of research on the issue (Cohen, 1972; Young, 1971; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, Roberts, 1978) is processual, and focuses primarily on the causes and consequences of labelling in a specific manner some designated groups of people or phenomena. Specifically, it focuses on the social and cultural construction of responses to events perceived as threatening to the community[4]. Within this framework, moral panic is

[3] M. McLuhan in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), but it was S. Cohen, in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics. The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (1972), put moral panic on the map of social science. Along with J. Young's *The Drugtakers: The Social Meaning of Drug Use* (1971) and *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978) by S. Hall, C. Critcher, T. Jefferson, J. Clarke, and B. Roberts, this body of work laid the foundation for ongoing scholarly debate on the phenomenon (Wright Monod, 2017).

[4] The nature of moral panic and its processual character is neatly summarized in oft-quoted citation from Cohen (1972): "[s]ocieties appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the

conceptualized as a combination of three main processes: exaggeration and distortion, symbolization, and the prediction of consequences if no action is taken (Cohen, 1972). In S. Cohen's view, such events are unintended and unanticipated (Wright Monod, 2017), whereas, according to S. Hall et al. (1978), they represent an ideological event through which a specific crisis is constructed, controlled, and managed (Wright Monod, 2017).

Another line of investigation, representing the second wave of research (Goode, Ben-Yehuda, 1994; McRobbie, Thornton, 1995; Thompson, 1998; Ungar, 2001), is attributional in nature, and it focuses on identifying and revising the key characteristics that define moral panic. This research is conducted with the understanding that moral panics occur in an environment marked by rapid changes in communication tools, as well as social, economic, and technological transformations. These shifts are often seen as contributing to the creation of a society shaped by fear and risk (Ungar, 2001; Crichter, 2011, Wichłacz 2017) and to the increasing normalization of media-induced panics (McRobbie, Thornton, 1995). The diversity, scale, and intensity of these processes on individuals and communities contribute to the phenomenon of moral panic to be revived.

Critcher (2017) identifies three significant similarities and three key differences between the approaches discussed. The shared insights include (i) viewing moral panic as an extreme version of broader societal processes; (ii) a recurring feature of modern society that influences law and state institutions, and (iii) recognizing its core function as reaffirming the fundamental values of society. The differences between the processual and attributional approaches center on the role of media in shaping moral panics (whether it is strategic or more passive), the primary agents of social panic (state agencies, politicians, and legislators vs. claims-makers), and the language used (ideological discourses vs. claims-making rhetoric).

The mainstream of moral panic research has been subjected to extensive criticism and revisionist approaches. Core characteristics and assumptions of traditional models have been debated and challenged, including the notion that disproportionality and irrationality are essential elements of moral panic (Waddington, 1986), the view of moral panic as primarily a mechanism to protect social cohesion and legitimize normative boundaries imposed on society (Garland, 2008), the unified concept of "folk devils" (McRobbie, 1994; Critcher, 2011), the exclusion or marginalization of non-classic, non-hostile reactions to moral panic (Hsu, 2014; Pearce, Charman, 2011, after Zielińska, Pasamonik, 2021), its strong normative connotations that ultimately frames moral panic as an intellectual project that promotes anti-conservative political agenda (Best, 2011, Carlson, 2016).

Among the various efforts to broaden the theoretical reformulation and expansion of the concept of moral panics, several approaches can be distinguished. These include the introduction of the concept of polarizing moral panic (Zielińska, Pasamonik, 2021), the proposal to incorporate issues of legitimacy (McDermott, 2013) and charismatic agency (Josse, 2018) into the moral panic framework, the situating of moral panic within a broader

mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which 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".

structural perspective, viewing it as part of routine moral regulation practices aimed at maintaining hegemonic power dynamics (Critcher, 2009; Hier, 2002, 2008; Rohloff, Wright, 2010) and also civilizing/decivilizing processes, involving the regulation and redefinition of the self and/or others to mitigate the negative social effects of heightened crises (Rohloff, 2008, 2011a; Rohloff, Wright, 2010; Hier, 2016). There is also recognition of the possibility of "good", progressive, and socially desirable moral panics (Cohen, 2002; Hier, 2017)[5].

4. MORAL PANIC AS MORAL REGULATION

Within conventional approaches to moral panic research, the role of language as an instrument for constructing social problems is recognised, but not necessarily regarded as a central category. The narrative nature of moral panic goes beyond simple labelling and stigmatisation; it shapes the very foundations and principles of public debate. When understood as a form of moral regulation, moral panic is not merely a contingent, episodic, or extraordinary event characterized solely by irrational reactions or actions (Hier, 2016). Rather, it constitutes „a formative process in ongoing moral regulation process" (Hier, 2016).

Moral regulation processes "involve practices whereby some social agents problematise some aspect of the conduct, values or culture of others on moral grounds and seek to impose moral regulations on them" (Hunt, 1999).

Moral regulation should not be confused with traditional concepts of social control, which focus solely on punishing others' behaviour, nor with ideological regulation that serves to mask specific sets of economic or political interests. Moral regulation is a transformative process that alters not only the behaviour but also the identity of those being regulated. It may also indirectly influence the regulators themselves (Hunt, 1999; Critcher, 2009). At its core, moral regulation projects aim "to effect changes in the conduct and ethical subjectivity of individuals" (Hunt, 1999; cited in Critcher, 2009), reveal the identity and drive the ethical self-formation of both the regulators and the regulated (Hier, 2002).

Moral regulation projects are not necessarily fixed strategies, they can take various forms and encompass different contents, they "form an interconnected web of discourses, symbols and practices exhibiting persistent continuities that stretch across time and place" (Hunt, 1999) – "there is no inherent limit on the scope of moral regulation" (Crichter, 2009). Such a web is embedded in the antagonistic nature of human communities, whose unity and continuity are inseparably linked to differing assumptions about the shape of the community.

5. MORAL PANIC: ANTAGONISM AND AGONISM

Moral panic arises from the antagonistic nature of human communities, whose unity and survival are inherently tied to the functioning of differing assumptions about the shape of the community. The formation of a collective subject is always associated with the establishment of antagonistic and exclusive boundaries between "us" and "them" (Mouffe, 2005). In her analysis of contemporary politics, Ch. Mouffe observed that

[5] For a comprehensive and in-depth review of developments in moral panic studies see (Smoczyński, 2016).

> What is happening is that nowadays the political is played out in the moral register. In other words, it still consists in a we/they discrimination, but the we/they, instead of being defined with political categories, is now established in moral terms (Mouffe, 2005).

Setting such boundaries also enables the constitution of the identity of the subjects. "They" are both the condition of the possibility of a given social order and the condition of its impossibility. Entangled in the dialectical relationship of being an element of the excluded and exclusive order, they strive to destabilize or overthrow it. In other words, the establishment of a "we" necessarily depends on the type of "those" from whom "we" will be distinguished. This means that depending on the way in which "them" are constructed, the features of "us" and possible different types of we/them relations are revealed. Antagonism is expressed in the struggle to hear and recognize the voice of someone who has not participated in the discussion so far or has not been heard enough. It is usually an act of exclusion. Agonism is not fulfilled through exclusion, it is a positive recognition of otherness. The phenomenon of moral panic overcomes the inclusion constitutive of agonism in favour of exclusion, thus transforming it into antagonism (More on this topic in: Drałus, 2012). Radicalization is very often associated with a growing sense of threat, which is often imaginary. It is usually expressed using simplified linguistic structures, so it becomes a simple message with a strong emotional impact capable of eliciting a sense of fear. For example, a belief in an imminent danger caused by the evil that lurks in strangers, spread in the language of hate, triggers, in turn, the need for its genuine personified identification and then annihilation. In social and political practice, it means actions leading to the selection of a deviant, the so-called folk devil, as a scapegoat[6]. In this way, the indicated evil – the other – becomes a catalyst for negative emotions growing in society due to various internal and external causes, e.g. failures and frustration. The most common effect of social stigmatization is the exclusion of the stigmatized person or group from the society.

The mechanism of designating "deviants" is a factor initiating the phenomenon of moral panic. Such individuals or their groups are unequivocally and indisputably ascribed the status of outsiders, the "others" with whom we have no common features and do not share any values. Their "otherness" is understood in absolute terms, as a complete

[6] K. Thompson identifies five phases of the moral panic process: 1) The initial definitions phase – a specific person, event, or behaviour is identified as a danger to society. Social evil is personified in the form of deviants – "folk devils" – who pose a threat to social norms, values, and interests. 2) The labelling phase – the process of escalating social anxiety by presenting (usually in media) a stereotypical and stylized image of the deviants, who are assigned typical "labels" based on their appearance, behaviour, beliefs, lifestyle, etc. 3) The phase of heightened anxiety – intensified public reactions (increasing number of television debates, discussions on social media, etc.). 4) The reaction phase – a broad public debate unfolds, involving social authorities, members of the public, and "claims-makers", both individuals and institutional players, who often adopt the role of "moralists" Especially the latter emphasize the need to strengthen social control in order to restore social order, which, in their view, aligns with the expectations of the majority of citizens. Their actions take the form of a more systematic, long-term "moral crusade" aimed at completely eradicating deviance and restoring the moral order. 5) The phase of reducing social tension – the moral panic recedes and quiets down. It may result in permanent changes, such as institutional or legislative reforms, but it can also fade away without leaving any trace (Thompson, 1999; Zielińska, 2004).

separation from the "social, moral and cultural universe of ordinary, decent people" (Greer, Jewkes, 2005). The concept of the "folk devil" appears – a figure "that society erects to show its members which roles should be avoided and which should be emulated (…) visible reminders of what we should not be" (Cohen, 2002). Such a figure becomes the antithesis of decency, righteousness, social order, security and stability. It personifies and symbolizes evil, "an object onto which collective fears are projected – a monster of human imagination" (Wargacki, 2009).

What is specific in the dynamics of moral panic is the lack of connection between the act committed by the individual and the status of a deviant. The direct cause of recognizing someone as a deviant lies in the public reaction to a given act. A behaviour is marked as deviant *ex post,* following the imposing rules and sanctions on the perpetrator. The status of a deviant is given to the one to whom such a label has been effectively attached. This imposed status quickly becomes permanent and dominant, while all others are subordinated to it. As a consequence, it becomes the identifier of the entity (Becker, 1966).

In the scientific discussion on the problem of designating the "folk devil", interesting questions arise about why some but not some other acts or phenomena are recognized by the environment as deviant. Therefore, the centre of analysis should not be the deviant act itself, but rather the social audience as the fundamental variable of the research because it decides whether a specific behaviour is to be marked as deviant.

6. TWO INJUSTICES, TWO WRONGS

A theoretical framework for analyzing moral panic may not be complete without categories that enable it to capture the harmful consequences of such panic. The harm affects in particular individuals or groups labeled as folk devils. What is interesting in this context is that the harm is inflicted by the instigators of the moral panic, who accuse the targeted individuals of causing harm themselves.

To capture some aspects of the problem one may turn to the idea of epistemic injustice proposed by Fricker (2007). As she claims, "any epistemic injustice wrongs someone in their capacity as a subject of knowledge, and thus in a capacity essential to human value" (Fricker, 2007). It seems incontestable that in the case of moral panic injustice, harm and violence emerge already at the stage of formulating discriminative categories. Their impact is most painfully experienced by people without power. The ability to establish and perpetuate discriminative categories lies outside the dominated groups. In opposition to them, people or groups in power have the appropriate tools to express their particular interests in universally sounding and thus compelling terms. Verbal stigmatisation of the victim initially causes symbolic harm, which subsequently turns into physical harm. Analyzing the consequences of producing harm and marking those those subjected to it in the process of moral panic complements the issue of epistemic injustice.

Epistemic injustice assumes two forms. The first, testimonial injustice, is a type of injustice expressed with various levels of credibility. "Testimonial injustice happens when a speaker receives a deficit of credibility owing to the operation of prejudice in the hearer's judgment" (Fricker, 2013). It appears when the prejudices of the listeners cause them to attribute a lower level of credibility to the speaker's words. In other words, testimonial injustice is a systemic underestimation of the credibility of a person's statement due to an existing prejudice against them. "Prejudice can prevent speakers from successfully putting knowledge into the public domain reveals testimonial injustice as a serious form of unfreedom in our collective speech situation" (Fricker, 2009). This is due to unequal power

and the language which promotes inequality. It is the language of labels, prejudices, stereotypes, and all performatives employing which narratives about people are imposed from the perspective of one's own interests, and without taking into account the interests of these people.

The second type of epistemic injustice, hermeneutical one, refers to "significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource" (Fricker, 2007). It thus implies the subject's systematic and persistent (Fricker, 2007) ability to interpret the social world, and in particular to interpret one's own social experiences in an adequate way. It occurs when a group is marginalized and its members cannot participate in the social processes of creating meanings that are necessary for them to interpret the social world. Hermeneutical injustice therefore indicates a conceptual void in the social system of meanings, an inability to name in the public language some experience, and an incorrect interpretation of this experience. It makes it impossible to understand the experiences of a group of people which leaves an unexplained gap in their collective imagination. Hermeneutical injustice arises from an unconscious deficit of a common language; unable to find adequate words, its users involuntarily repeat the harmful content embedded in it (Fricker, 2007). Symbolic harm thus causes real harm, even if is not socially appreciated because of the lack of an adequate name for it or the lack of an adequate non-harmful interpretation. It may happen that most sensitive individuals will be able to notice this problem and make an effort to fill the conceptual gap, develop names for the harm done, and also eliminate erroneous judgments about wronged persons and actions towards them. Epistemic forms of injustice hurt the subject's participation in political life: they reduce the person's ability to express their agency and co-shape the social processes concerning them. Such phenomena have their source in unequal power and the language it promotes.

The concept of epistemic injustice enables one to distinguish two types of wrongs, primary epistemic wrong from secondary practical wrong (Fricker, 2007). The epistemic wrong is the inadequate presentation of a given group of people in the social reservoir of meanings, and its exclusion from participation in the social creation of meanings. The secondary wrong is the loss of faith in one's own ability to understand the world and also social exclusion.

Primary wrong resulting from a conceptual gap can make someone's experience incomprehensible to society. The lack of adequate categories makes it impossible to express one's experiences in a comprehensible way (Fricker, 2007). Suppressing internal tension, pain, lack of understanding and other destructive consequences leads to secondary practical wrong, such as fear, shame, masking, denial, and auto-aggression, which in turn deforms the process of identity formation.

The above enables one to make subtle comparisons between moral panic and moral regulation. They seem to have two key features in common. Each of them involves one set of people who try to act on the basis of the behaviour of others. In both cases, regulators confirm their identity, even when they try to change others. However, the differences are no less significant. First, moral panic does not require any "reform of the character of moral deviants" (Hier, 2002), but only direct and coercive intervention. Second, moral panic involves a much sharper distinction between innocent victims and guilty perpetrators than is the case in moral regulation. They appeal to the moral economy of harm: the idea that some are harmed by the actions of others. Moral panic is thus a temporary rupture in the routine process of moral regulation, occurring "at the moment when moral regulation is perceived to be in a state of failure or disorder" (Hier, 2002). Moral panic is thus "an

unstable local manifestation of what might otherwise be considered a global project of moral regulation" (Hier, 2002, emphasis in original).

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