

PhD Programme in Political and Social Sciences – 40° cycle

Moral panics: from the origins of the concept to contemporary developments

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Syllabus

Course description

In this seminar course we will introduce and examine the concept of moral panic, from its origin to its latest developments and applications. We will discuss foundational work in this field, reflecting on the importance of media representations in the context of the social construction of deviance and criminality, as well as of more recent scholarship on social harms and digital interactions to consider the effects of social changes and digital technologies on communicative practices, power dynamics, and policy making.

Requirements

- Class participation (30% of the final grade). Classes will be based on interactive lectures (after a brief introduction by the instructor). Each student is expected to read the required material before class, and to engage in class discussion.
- Individual presentation (30% of the final grade). During our final class together, students will be required to present a potential application of the moral panic concept applied to a topic connected to their research interests, and a feasible design for an exploratory original research.
- Research paper (40% of the final grade). Each student will write a short research paper (approx. 4000 words) based on what was discussed during the individual presentation. The paper is due four weeks from the end of the seminar course.

Topics and reading list

Class 1 (3/2/2025, 10-12)

On the importance of media representations (of crime, deviance, and social harms)

Hillyard P & Tombs S (2007) From 'crime' to social harm? *Crime, Law and Social Change* 48: 9-25.

Yar M (2012). Crime, media and the will-to-representation: Reconsidering relationships in the new media age. *Crime, Media, Culture* 8(3): 245-260.

Class 2 (10/2/2025, 10-13)

Moral panics: the classics

Critcher C (2008) Moral panic analysis: Past, present and future. *Sociology Compass* 2(4): 1127-1144.

Goode E & Ben-Yehuda N (1994) Moral panics: Culture, politics, and social construction. *Annual Review of Sociology* 20(1): 149-171.

McRobbie A & Thornton SL (1995) Rethinking 'Moral Panic' for Multi-Mediated Social Worlds. *The British Journal of Sociology* 46(4): 559-574.

Class 3 (17/2/2025, 10-13)

Moral panics: the evolution of the concept, and its challenges

Critcher C (2009) Widening the focus: Moral panics as moral regulation. *The British Journal of Criminology* 49(1): 17-34.

David M, Rohloff A, Petley J & Hughes J (2011) The idea of moral panic—ten dimensions of dispute. *Crime, Media, Culture* 7(3): 215-228.

Hier S (2017) Good moral panics? Normative ambivalence, social reaction, and coexisting responsibilities in everyday life. *Current Sociology* 65(6):867-885.

Class 4 (24/2/2025, 10-13)

The politics of moral panics (case study I: environmental harms)

Brisman A & South N (2015) New 'Folk Devils', denials and climate change: Applying the work of Stanley Cohen to green criminology and environmental harm. *Critical Criminology* 23:449-460.

Cohen S (2011) Whose side were we on? The undeclared politics of moral panic theory. *Crime, Media, Culture* 7(3):237-243.

Hier SP (2024) Rethinking the Problem of Disproportion: Overreaction, Underreaction, and Normativism in Moral Panic Studies. *The American Sociologist* 55: 59-78.

Class 5 (10/3/2025, 10-13)

The contemporary appearance of moral panics in the digital arena (case study II: cybercrimes)

Lavorgna A (2019) Cyber-organised crime. A case of moral panic? *Trends in Organized Crime* 22(4): 357-374.

Walsh JP (2020) Social media and moral panics: Assessing the effects of technological change on societal reaction. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23(6):840-859.

Class 6 (17/3/2025, 10-13)

New power dynamics (case study III: information pollution and toxic communication)

Hier S (2019) *Moral panics and digital-media logic: Notes on a changing research agenda*. *Crime, Media, Culture* 15(2): 379-388.

Lavorgna A & Massa E (2023) Moral panics and health-related misinformation: when the audience becomes co-producer. In Tartari M, Rinaldi C & Scarcelli CM (eds.) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics in the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Routledge.

Ural H & Eslen-Ziya H (2024) The translation of moral panic into misogynist e-bile: the case of Turkish singer Gülşen. *Feminist Media Studies* (online first).

Class 7 (31/3/2025, 10-13)

Some recent applications of the concept + individual presentations

Amery F & Mondon A (2024) Othering, peaking, populism and moral panics: The reactionary strategies of organised transphobia. *The Sociological Review* (online first).

Walker A (2023) Transphobic discourse and moral panic convergence: A content analysis of my hate mail. *Criminology* 61: 994-1021.