

**QUESTION 9:**

With reference to relevant theoretical literature and contemporary media examples, analyse the construction of a recent 'moral panic'. What ideological role has this panic served?

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“To the outsider glancing at the newsstands, modern London must appear as a fearful, dark, Dickensian space of casual, perpetual youth violence, where social conventions have crumbled and a misplaced look or accidental elbowing earns you a death sentence. Since the start of 2007, seven young men—six of them teenagers—have been murdered in the capital; four stabbed and three shot. The nature of the deaths—several victims were directly targeted by their killers, either in their own homes or in very public places—has created an indelible and visceral image of streets awash with lawless youth, with little respect for authority and no disdain for violence as common currency to solve the most trivial issues.”

Jonathan Bell, *A Mystery of Violence*

In the space of 12 days in February, 2007, 3 black teenagers in South London were killed with guns: On Feb. 3rd, 16-year-old James Andre Smarrt-Ford was shot twice at an ice skating rink in Streatham (Laville); on Feb. 6th, 15-year-old Michael Dosunmu was shot in his Peckham bedroom (Akbar); and on Feb. 14th, 15-year-old Billy Cox of Clapham North was also shot in his house (“Billy’s graffiti”). Ensuing moral and social commentary by journalists, politicians and pundits arrived swiftly and in plentiful quantities, thus ensuring a place in the British media spotlight for the latest ‘wave of violence’ to sweep through through the ‘lethal streets’ (“Guns”) of the nation’s capitol. ‘Experts’ were brought in by media and political institutions alike in order to determine the ‘causes’ of the violence and prescribe solutions for the ‘crime wave’. *The Guardian’s* Joseph Parker laid partial blame at the foot of the entertainment industry and rap music’s ‘glorification’ of weapons and gang culture, echoing London Mayor Ken Livingstone’s words from 2005 that “Some overpaid rap artists swinging around with a gun or knife...the consequences of their behaviour is a kid lying dead in the street” (“Mayor blames”). Other commentators condemn the breakdown of traditional family structures (single mothers, currently referred to as ‘fatherlessness’) and the ‘destruction’ of marriage as fac-

tors in the rise in gang activity and gun violence in the UK. As Melanie Phillips of *The Daily Mail* writes,

“The problem is not too few laws or not enough police powers. It is that the laws we already have are being actively undermined by a culture that is sliding towards social anarchy...At the heart of the problem is family breakdown and the widening epidemic of mass fatherlessness, condoned and promoted by political and legal circles hell-bent on destroying marriage and promoting the myth that every kind of family is as good as any other.”

Earlier on in Phillips' piece, she accuses Tony Blair of a knee-jerk, panicked political response in his pledge to enact tougher gun laws in response to the Peckham shootings, but her own rhetoric of 'a culture sliding toward social anarchy' also strikes the reader as a response full of panic and fear. These sorts of exaggerations and 'over reporting' tend to be common in media accounts of (Cohen 32). But not all reports share the same ideological perspective. While more conservative publications such as *The Daily Mail* blame family breakdown and loss of 'traditional values' for the apparent rise in youth crime, those on the left more often see poverty and poor provision of social and civil services for young people as motivations for a turn toward drug dealing and gangs. In the February 8th, 2007 edition of the *Guardian*, Camila Batmanghelidjh outlines the ways in which violence emerges from a youth street economy that relies upon drug dealing and other criminal activity to provide a basic level of sustenance for its adherents. For Batmanghelidjh, it is not the breakdown of traditional family structures but the lack of a properly funded and staffed social safety system that leads to crime in poverty-stricken areas.

Many news articles about the shootings also quote 'gang members' and fear-stricken 'local residents' to add legitimacy or 'street cred' to their stories: A 'veteran member' of the Peckham Boys Gang tells *The Daily Mail* that getting a gun is "like going to order a takeaway now. It's ridiculous."

(Price). Another quote from a Peckham 'gang member' in the same *Daily Mail* article appears to support the thesis that entertainment promotes drugs, guns, and gangs to young people: "You go on certain cable channels and you hear it all in the music. They're glorifying it. Talking about drugs, guns - it's all gone mad" (Ibid.). In a BBC article entitled "Guns Plague Peckham Despite Investment," Peckham resident and head of campaign group 'Mothers Against Guns' Lucy Cope describes Peckham as "England's Bronx", a place where "Children are scared to go to school, parents are scared to let them go out or leave them home alone. You're not even secure in your own home now" (Shukor). While the comparison with the Bronx might not be particularly apt or even accurate – the Bronx borough of New York City alone saw 155 homicides in 2006 ("Police Department City of New York") compared with 5 homicides during the same period in the London borough of Southwark, which includes Peckham (Shukor) – the reader is imbued with the picture of a Peckham mother trapped in an urban war zone, fearful for her children's safety and indeed, for her own life.

The exaggerated rhetoric and extensive media coverage surrounding the February 2007 shootings in South London lead us to consider a few questions: does this period adequately demonstrate the construction of a 'moral panic'? If so, what sort of ideological roles might the moral panic serve? If not, what terms might be useful to replace 'moral panic' as a way to describe the social and political processes at work during periods of apparent change in social behaviour? By analysing the both the media reaction and the UK government's response to the shootings in the context of previous moral panic research (especially *Policing The Crisis* by Stuart Hall, et al., and *Folk Devils & Moral Panics* by Stan Cohen), I hope to outline several similarities between the South London shootings and earlier periods of 'panic'. However, in concurrence with McRobbie and Thornton's essay *Rethinking 'moral panic' for multi-mediated social worlds*, I also believe that moral panic theory has many limitations in modern media research and I will engage with some of these problems toward the end of this inquiry.

In the 1970s, the emergence of the 'moral panic' concept both as social phenomenon and as theoretical field of study examined the ways in which 'symbolic crusades' (Cohen 11) are mounted by mass media institutions and agents of social control against perceived threats to the dominant social order. In his pioneering work *Folk Devils & Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, Cohen outlines the construction of the moral panic surrounding the appearance of the Mods and the Rockers in mid-1960s England. By detailing the exaggeration and distortion of newspaper reports surrounding the activities of the Mods and Rockers, by documenting the response of police, politicians, and other 'agents of control' to the media accounts, and by showing that methods of controlling the panic did not actually have an impact in reducing 'deviance' but to amplify it, Cohen explains how the media plays an ideological role in constructing boundaries around what are acceptable behaviours and what are deviant behaviours and how 'folk devils' are created as an example of 'what' or 'who' not to be:

“In the gallery of types that society erects to show its members which roles should be avoided and which should be emulated, these groups have occupied a constant position as folk devils: visible reminders of what we should not be” (10).

Cohen's study shows how moral panics can help to 'orchestrate consent' in society and in public consciousness by using rhetorical and emotive language to convince the public that 'something has to be done' about the behaviour of the 'deviants' who are seen as instigators of and participants in the panic (McRobbie 562). This orchestration of consent also helps to develop a public who become an 'informal' force for control, as Cohen notes in response to the Mods and Rockers, "there was a process whereby members of the public, acting as informal control agents, brought pressure to bear for rule-creation; that is, they referred their 'local' problem to the legislature" (113). Once rules, laws and legislation are created by government in response to the 'public outcry' over a moral panic, this also serves as an ideological function to reassure both media and public that there is a strong gov-

ernment in place (McRobbie 562) and that leaders are quick to act in implementing strong laws to deal with the behaviour of the 'folk devils'.

We can see a similar sequence of events occurring after the February 2007 shootings in London: outrage and exaggeration in media accounts, diagnoses and solutions proposed by experts and pundits, a call for tougher crime laws and enforcement or increased funding for social programmes, and in response to these calls, more strict sentences for firearm possession and more funding for community groups to fight the 'causes' of gun crime – poverty, neglect, educational failure – at their roots. But we've yet to discover the ideological role of the panic itself, if indeed 'panic' is the right word to use.

In a further exploration of the ideological function of moral panics, *Policing The Crisis*, first published in 1978, follows in the footsteps of *Folk Devils & Moral Panics* and examines the social construction of 'mugging' and 'crime' in early-to-mid 1970s Britain. Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts approach the moral panic of mugging from a neo-Marxist position of Gramscian ideological hegemony, and expose how public opinion is influenced and shaped by mass media coverage of events:

"The crystallizing of 'public opinion' is thus raised to a more formal and public level by the networks of the mass media...Events and issues only become *public* in the full sense when the means exist whereby the relatively 'separate worlds' of professional and lay opinion, of controller and controlled, are brought into relation with one another, and appear, for a time at least, to occupy the same space. It is communication and communication networks that create that complex creature we call 'public opinion'" (136).

By developing the moral panic around mugging and criminalising young black males as 'muggers' in public opinion (Hall *et al.* 327), the British media and state institutions were able to create "the social conditions of consent which were necessary for the construction of a society more focused to-

wards law and order and less inclined to the liberalism and ‘permissiveness’ of the 1960s” (McRobbie 562). For Hall *et al.*, the hegemonic function of the moral panic is to form social consensus around a shared system of values, values which the subordinate classes are led to believe by media are also ‘their values’ (Zylinska 49). This ‘ideology of common sense’ provides a reference point of normativity from which ‘deviance’ can be diagnosed, condemned and controlled.

I would suggest that a similar ideological role was served by the media coverage of the February 2007 shootings in South London – this role is one of creating narratives of fear around ‘young black urban gang members’ which lead to the legitimisation of additional forms of control such as increased numbers of police, new laws, and more surveillance technologies such as CCTV. The government’s response to the shootings is multi-faceted, a careful blend of longer minimum sentences for those found in possession of firearms and a new offence created for those who use others (especially children) to courier or hide guns, ‘putting more police on the street’, and providing ‘extra resources’ for community groups in areas of high gang activity and violence (“Gun minding”). After these types of measures have been implemented, it becomes important to make the public aware of the campaign’s successful results. For example, the main headline on the cover of the June, 2007 issue of *The Londoner* (the official news letter of the Mayor of London) reads “MORE POLICE LEAD TO DROP IN CRIME: Total number of offences in London down for the eighth year in a row”. The Metropolitan Police statistics invoked in the article do indeed indicate a drop in most crime categories – including a notable drop in ‘gun-enabled crime’ of 11.3% and 40 fewer ‘Black-on-Black’ gun crime offences. Thus, the reader is led to conclude, larger numbers of police in London are making for ‘safer streets’ and that their presence also leads to fewer incidents of ‘gun-enabled crime’ in London. But according to a February 2007 BBC article, gun crime across England and Wales has been rising every year for the last decade, and while fatal black-on-black shootings declined from 18 in 2004/05 to 15 in 2005/06, non-fatal ‘Trident’ shootings rose from 185 to 251 in the same period

(Trident is a unit set up by the MP to deal specifically with gun crime in London's black communities) (Percival). Statistics, far from being empirical representations of truth, can also be tools of ideological construction, as Hall *et al.* demonstrate in *Policing The Crisis*:

“Statistics – whether crime rates or opinion polls – have an ideological function: they appear to *ground* free floating and controversial impressions in the hard, incontrovertible soil of numbers. Both the media and the public have enormous respect for ‘the facts’ – *hard facts*.”

(9)

And in London, the current ‘*hard facts*’ in relation to gun crime point toward black-on-black shootings in a majority of cases, thus reinforcing the relationship between blacks and guns in the public eye and echoing the racial ideology of the mugging panic described in *Policing the Crisis* – “the terms ‘mugging’ and ‘black crime’ are now virtually synonymous...the two are indissolubly linked: each term references the other in both the official and public consciousness” (327).

Despite the similarities and ideological functions of the South London shootings to previous moral panics, however, I'm still not convinced that the period represents a ‘moral panic’ as understood in the terms provided in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* and *Policing The Crisis*. While the media reaction to the shootings was perhaps ‘out of all proportion to the actual threat offered’ (Hall *et al.* 16) and although the coverage did provide an ideological role by creating an ‘other’ or ‘marginalised’ group of ‘young black males’ by which to legitimise normative social roles and further systems of control, media and social systems are much more complex and diverse in 2007 than in the 1970s, and in response, perhaps we need to approach the idea of ‘moral panic’ in different ways. In *Rethinking ‘moral panic’ for multi-mediated social worlds*, Angela McRobbie and Sarah Thornton question the role that ‘moral panics’ play in contemporary media worlds:

“The delicate balance of relations which the moral panic sociologists saw existing between media, agents of social control, folk devils and moral guardians, has given way to a much

more complicated and fragmented set of connections...This leads us to query the usefulness of the term 'moral panic' – a metaphor which depicts a complex society as a single person who experiences sudden fear about its virtue" (McRobbie 567).

McRobbie and Thornton make a convincing case for moving past classical 'moral panic' theory as a way of describing monolithic media. Folk devils, for example, are 'less marginalised' in a world where pressure and interest groups intervene instantly on behalf of those 'deviant' individuals and groups stereotyped (McRobbie 566), where marginalised groups increasingly produce their own forms of media and communication, and where even the mainstream media itself attempts to provide a 'voice' for dissenting groups. In response to media coverage of the February 2007 shootings, community groups such as Kids Company (Batmanghelidjh) and the Boyhood to Manhood foundation ("Mayor blames"), spoke up on behalf of the 'young black males' in South London. We even see the Southwark Borough MP Commander Malcolm Tillyer attempting to counter exaggerated rhetoric – "The individuals who are involved in these types of crimes are a very small minority" – and speaking up in support of Peckham: "...I don't believe that there's anywhere in the country where there are so many people doing so many good things to improve the lives of others" (Shukor). In a more diverse media world, press coverage can serve the purpose of bringing many perspectives to light and give a voice to marginalised groups.

I believe that it's important to conclude this inquiry with a reminder: that despite the exaggerated media rhetoric surrounding gun crime in London and the events of February 2007, young men actually died in violent acts. While we can provide theoretical analysis of the 'over-reporting' and dramatic hyperbole of media reports and examine the ideological function of 'panics' in forming social consensus around normative morality, we should be careful not to marginalise the suffering of the communities and families connected with these violent events. Perhaps by approaching the idea of 'panic' from a less monolithic, more intersubjective approach, by taking into account a diverse and

plural media environment both in terms of producers and audiences, and by taking care to avoid marginalising the suffering of communities and individuals involved with violence, we can come to an understanding of the ideological role of 'panic' and media that is more complex, heterogeneous and sensitive for a 'multi-mediated' age.

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