Carry on Panicking

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Address on receiving the Award for "Outstanding Achievement" from the British Society of Criminology at its Annual Conference, Cardiff, 29 June 2009

Introduction

I am very grateful to British Society of Criminology for giving me this award. I truly value this as an honour from my colleagues. I owe special thanks to David Downes for his support and generosity of spirit over the forty five years since my early graduate student days at LSE. Thanks also to those of you "out there" - my friends, ex-colleagues and ex-graduate students - for your support, loyalty and enthusiasm.

What do you say in a 20 minute "acceptance" talk for a prize that no one has received before? A competition that you hadn't heard of? What is the right note to strike? There are many publicized prizes and awards these days - whether in the arts, literature, academic disciplines, sports, public service etc. Surely I could draw on an existing template?

1. Obedient Servant Rewarded

This is the most often used, conformist and conventional of all narratives. Just an ordinary bloke or girl gradually climbs the right ladders, patiently playing according to the rules. This culminates in the appropriate reward. Everyone in her path has been marvellously helpful; every item on her CV (articles, research grants) is tested to be RAE positive and inexorably counts towards the end result[1].

2. Coming in from the Cold

This is about the youthful rebel: in some romantic versions he is the outsider, unrecognized, on the margins, dismissed either as a harmless nutter or a dangerous heretic, ostracized or ignored by his colleagues. In the less dramatic version, his work is seen as dull and boring, not "serious" enough to be taken seriously. But things change. In one narrative, he himself changes: - he adapts, tones down and compromises until he eventually melts into his environment. In this remaking of himself, he might denounce his own past (I will return later to the example from my generation: the renunciation of values supposedly connected to the loosely termed "Sixties"). In another narrative, the award-winner will tell you that he was right all the time and has remained utterly consistent. The change has come from outside – the hegemony of the old guard has gone (or in some stories, there has even been a "paradigm shift"), thus exonerating your original position.

3. Ironic Gesture

There is, of course, the possibility of refusing the award on ideological grounds. The refusal though must be public; there is no political gain in a private letter (you might just as well have pleaded swine-flu). There are many ideological grounds for refusal: the award (honour or money) is tainted (for example, the sponsor is involved with the arms trade); your fellow academics or artists are banned; a

[1] In the early Seventies, the head of a well known Sociology Department, would refer to articles written by staff since the last departmental meeting as "goals scored."

gesture of solidarity with whatever group is being currently oppressed and victimized. In addition to refusal, there is the option of ironic refusal. My acceptance of a prize - so I tell a credulous post-modernist audience - only *looks* like I'm being used to give moral credibility to the sponsoring organization or government.

But none of these models seemed to fit me. This, of course, is for others to judge but I don't think that my work has been conformist, nor have my values changed much. As for the option of refusal, well - as much as I researched the CV's and backgrounds of the BSC Executive Committee - I couldn't find anything incriminating. The BSC has not done bad things, not offended anybody, nor been undemocratic. It seems an exemplary professional association.

My assertion that my values have not changed expresses my particular aversion to the current "coming of age" trope[2] which denounces the values of the Sixties as naïve, adolescent, romantic, anarchistic and utopian. So they were, as Abby Hoffman famously remarked, but we were still right.

Last year, I gave a graduation day address to sociology students at Middlesex University. I talked about the clichéd advice that dominated these occasions: "Put your three years at university behind you; it's time to enter the real world." I told the students to please pay no attention to this advice. It's just another form of social control to stop you from continuing to appreciate the values that you should have picked up in any decent university - care for learning in itself; scepticism about accepted knowledge; the personal qualities of tolerance and friendship; the political values of fairness and social justice. Above all, they should question the notion that their three years of university were not "real", that university life was somehow "artificial". But what is taken as "real" life - A mental hospital? Perhaps the Houses of Parliament during the expenses story? A training school for suicide bombers? Or maybe reality television, watching a group of your fellow human beings degrade themselves and each other in front of audiences of 12 million?

I warned them - as I warn you - to beware of the people whom Saul Bellow calls *reality instructors*: You know those people who are always grabbing you to tell you "What Things Are Really Like": the cops, doctors, judges and journalists who instruct you on how things work "out there". The criminological version of "out there" is sitting in the back of a police van.

I said that those models of award-acceptance speeches didn't fit me. Allow me to end with the narrative of change and continuity which led up to the work I'm doing now. I promise not to instruct you about what is really real; my subject is rather what is really *important*.

Moral Panics

Folk Devils and Moral Panics was surely a child of its time and place. At the end of the Seventies I went to live in Israel for what turned out seventeen years. As this period moved along, so the book and its cultural milieu seemed more and more remote. Even the dumbest and most otiose sociology does not require a theory to "explain" the differences between Britain in the Sixties and Israel in the Eighties. I am merely trying to think aloud (and in print) about the complex links between biography and external social reality.

In the mid-Nineties, I returned to London and to teaching criminology, deviance and social control courses at the LSE. I tried to reconstruct for my students the texts and contexts of labelling theory, the

[2] A particular application - with the same social control functions - of the great wisdom that "If you are not a socialist when you are twenty, then you haven't got a heart; if you are still a socialist when you are forty, then you haven't got a head".

NDC, new deviancy theory and the new criminology. From my vantage point now, the criticism of our supposed liberal tolerance looks more interesting. The first wave of radical theorists had indeed argued that *too much* stuff was being (to use some ugly but useful terms) criminalized, deviantised or problematised): defining deviance up, as this was later called. The point is not whether we approve; nor whether we can sympathize, nor whose side we are on. Nor is everything simply a matter of political stance: non-interventionism can be justified by conservatives (not the responsibility of governments, leave it to the market); liberals (civil rights are threatened, private life is not the business of the state; and radicals (distrust of the repressive state apparatus, the crime problem requires not legal tinkering but radical change of whole society).

The eclectic elements in the original discourse - symbolic interactionism, socialism, restorative justice - hardly added up to a coherent social policy. Social policy is by definition interventionist - which means *doing something* about the problem, for example: moral enterprise to stop the problem from being normalised, further enterprise to draw attention to its seriousness, new laws, prohibitions or sanctions; improving the criminal justice and other social control systems. But these responses only make sense if you have taken the problem seriously. This recognition soon prompted the radical model to develop its own internal self correction. Therefore the phase of "left realism" and "taking crime seriously".

The pristine rhetoric was "against" the moral panic: there's no need to panic, calm down, it's not that serious, it's not the end of the world, there are more serious problems. The liberal and radical exposures of moral panic was informed by discovery or recovery of victims - especially under the driving force of feminism. The (still expanding) literature on victims, harm, danger and risk began to examine the empirical base for what has been on the agenda of ethics and moral philosophy for centuries.

Denial

The phenomena that concerned me in *States of Denial* were undisputedly serious - torture, genocide, ethnic violence, terror, political massacres, atrocities of all types, "social suffering" resulting from poverty, racism as well as natural disasters. And just as I had written more about moral panics than folk devils, I was now dealing with reactions to these phenomena (my subtitle is *Knowledge About Atrocities And Suffering*) rather than the phenomena themselves. I don't want to repeat what the book says about how my life in Israel influenced my whole subject, nor about the concept of denial. My viewpoint here is much narrower: the hidden continuities and overlaps between these two books.

The most obvious link, is that the entire human rights enterprise is a product of social construction. The legalistic ownership of the problem is conveyed in the relatively recent term "human rights violations". This translates the traditional moralistic language of sin and evil into the legal dialect. In the public realm, however, this translation hardly ever works: participation in genocide, for example, is not convincingly described as a "human rights violation". The more pictorial languages of atrocity and social suffering are obviously more appropriate.

In any event, the work of humanitarian organizations and the media is clearly a form of moral enterprise; there are moral crusades and campaigns. But are there moral panics? And is there anything helpful in conceptualizing them as the "opposite" of denial? I was prompted to ask these questions by current versions of the standard critique that the concept of moral panic is inherently normative, political and value-loaded. The Melanie Phillips version is best known: the left-liberal elitists (who, of course, dominate the media) have simply applied the label of moral panic in a selective and biased way to the wholly justified reactions of ordinary people to real problems.

Hysterical as the "right realist" position may be, there a peculiar sense in which Phillips is correct. When these left liberals study or support social movements - say, in favour of animal rights or the heavier criminalization of domestic violence - they will hardly describe them moral panics.[3] The category of moral panic is, however, "objective" in the sense that the criteria for defining some social reactions as moral panics and others not, can be set out and applied by any observer. Thus there can theoretically be "negative moral panics" (the traditional ones that criminologists so readily detect, expose and criticize) but also "positive moral panics": the ones that we approve.

The problem, so one argument goes, lies in the particularly negative connotations of the word "panic": hysteria, exaggeration, crowd behaviour, delusion and - above all - irrationality. Lets see what happens if we use alternative words: yes, it does makes considerably more sense to talk of an "approved crusade" than an "approved panic". But this loses the particular connotations of "panic" that you want to retain!

All these tricky matters become trickier if we compare moral panic with denial. I have argued that denial in the personal realm is morally nuanced and ambiguous; there are defensible and positive functions. In the public realm, however, denial always has to be denounced as the enemy. This, of course, begs the question about the difference between private and public. And in the realms of social life that interest me most - at the interface between the personal and the political - it is near-impossible to use some words in a neutral way: passivity, inertia, silence, normalization, collusion, cover-up, turning a blind eye, the bystander effect, compassion fatigue. The opposite of all this is acknowledgement of the truth and acting accordingly. But to dwell nowadays on matters like "the truth" is to invite theoretical questions way beyond my reach. Let me rather examine the concept at work.

Climate Change

The emergence of climate change as a major public problem, no doubt needs setting in the wider discourse about ecology, environmentalist social movements and green politics. I use this only as a more specific case study of denial and moral panic. I don't know the literature well enough to do more than list some points of entry:

1. Climate change seems to fit the social constructionist model. There were all the familiar stages in the natural history of social problem construction; there are identifiable moral entrepreneurs - whether individuals (politicians, activists, scientists) and organizations; there are claims-makers, contesting not only rival models of knowledge, policy and risk-management, but also the most basic claims about the problem's existence.

2. The rhetoric about climate change draws on the classic moral panic repertoire: disaster, apocalyptic predictions, warning of what might happen if nothing is done, placing the problem in wider terms (the future of the planet!). According to Tom Burke, climate is: "the most serious threat to humanity since the invention of nuclear weapons."

3. Truth claims are made as facts beyond questioning. The facts are so obvious, that "the task of climate change agencies is not to persuade by rational argument, but in effect to develop and

[3] The political ambiguities in moral panic theory have been well discussed in the literature. See, for example, the recent Special Issue of the British Journal of Criminology, 49(1), January 2009.

nurture a new 'common sense'….*The* "facts" need to be treated as so taken-for-granted that they need not be spoken.[4]

4. Within the environmentalist movement itself, there is an explicit discourse about climate change denial. There is a "Climate Change Denial Website" and a Google search yields 390,000 entries. My book on denial is much cited - an ironic flattery because I clearly express my own lack of enthusiasm about the environmental cause.

5. The discourse about climate change is quite unusual in concentrating so much on what I called *literal denial.* The core of the climate change movement is the construction of any sort of doubt, qualification or disagreement as denial. And they mean not just the passive denial of indifference, but the active work of "denialists". Sceptics are demonized: treated like retarded or crazy persons, people who just don't get it. Taking his cue From Al Gore, here is David Miliband: those who deny climate dangers are "the flat earthers of the twenty-first century", A group of Australian activists and journalists have suggested that climate change denial should become a crime like Holocaust Denial; deniers should be brought before a Nuremberg-style court. We must make them responsible for the thousands of deaths which will happen if global warming alarm not heeded.

6. Most important of all: the environmental cause is winning hearts and minds. A new part in the moral edifice of society is close to being created. The process of social problem construction is just about complete. Moral entrepreneurs though, will have to remain active - for example, combating climate change denial. But the discourse of the major institutions of society has been changed; for example: the curricula of schools, the public face of big business, the greening of party politics, the very existence of separate government departments of ministries; and of course, the morality plays of the mass media. (A recent *Observer* Sunday Supplement was described as a guide for ethical living. The entire magazine was devoted to environmental causes, instructions on how to live good life. In an ethical life, you learn to put your computer on standby, to give up your electric toothbrush and keep a record of your carbon footprints.)

All this invites two types of question. The *empirical* question is whether the environmental appeal is competing with humanitarian causes for public support or has its own constituency. The *normative* question - forgive this Walt Disney simplification - is which of these you would choose to worry about and which you would rather deny.

Moving On

Here, after a journey into the past, is where we have reached:

The critique behind the concept of moral panics, is that too much attention (human resources, moral indignation, social construction) is given to the particular problem at issue. The critique behind the concept of denial is too little attention of the same type is given to a particular problem.

Taking off from denial theory, I'm continuing to work on the "particular problem" of public response to representations (by humanitarian organizations and the mass media) of the suffering of distant others. I'm reading more about selective attention, moral judgement and the ethics of responsibility to others. The point is to locate these individual matters in specific social and political contexts.

[4] Ereaut, G. and Segnit, N. (2006) *Warm Words: How are we telling the climate story and can we tell it better?* London: Institute for Public Policy Research.

This might be a long way from criminology. But so be it. It might seem strange, but for many of us, criminology has been the best starting point to arrive at these wider questions. This is why I'm pleased to accept an award in *criminology*.

Stanley Cohen, London, August 2009

Some images from the 2009 BSC Conference in Cardiff

Professors David Downes, Stanley Cohen and Mike Hough outside Cardiff City Hall

Chief Constable Barbara Wilding

Professor Lawrence Sherman