

Satires 3: What's Wrong with Moral Panic?

Every few years, the British public convinces itself that something is going to destroy society. Not in the slow, structural way that austerity or climate change actually does destroy things, but in the quick, lurid way that tabloid newspapers find most alarming and most profitable. The thing changes. The panic stays the same.

Stanley Cohen, who gave us the phrase 'moral panic' in 1972, described it as a condition in which "*a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests.*" The key word is *defined*. The threat is not so much discovered as constructed, assembled from moral entrepreneurship, media amplification, and the genuine psychological utility of having someone else to blame.

The utility is the important part. Because moral panics do useful work for the people who promote them, even if they don't help anyone else. They rally the faithful. They shift public attention away from systemic failures and onto individual villains. They sell newspapers, fill airtime, and give politicians an easy answer to complicated questions. What causes youth crime? *Video nasties*. What corrupts children? *Rave music*. Why are families falling apart? *Divorce*. Why is everything getting worse? *Transgender people*.

And then, eventually, they end. Because the thing that was supposed to destroy civilisation didn't. The teenagers who were going to be corrupted by 70s rock psychedelia grew up and became accountants. All that long hair and those flares may have been a crime against fashion, but society-killers they were not.

The Usual Suspects

Let's run through a few of the classics, shall we?

The 1950s gave us the Teddy Boy panic. Young men with slicked hair and drape jackets were apparently engaged in a concerted effort to undermine British values through the corrosive influence of American rock and roll. The Teddy Boys were going to destroy the nation's 'yoof'. They didn't. They mostly put aside their brothel-crawlers and were drafted into National Service.

The, by the 1960s, the mods and rockers were threatening to tear the country apart. Bank holiday weekends became scenes of apocalyptic conflict between parka-wearing mods and leather-clad rockers, if you believed the newspapers. The reality was rather less dramatic, involving mostly badly sunburnt teenagers and a cathartic amount of beach-based vandalism (and punch-ups). But the papers needed the drama, and the drama was supplied, and Britain briefly believed it was at war with its own young people. Yes, as Pete Townshend pointed out (repeatedly), there was youth alienation afoot. But a dose of mid-60s rampant consumerism seems to have dented its fury.

The 1970s and 1980s were a particularly rich decade for moral entrepreneurship. The video nasties panic saw films like *Dawn of the Dead* and *The Evil Dead* declared threats to the very fabric of British society, with the Director of Public Prosecutions maintaining a list of films that would corrupt anyone who watched them. This list included some genuinely unpleasant material but also several films that

are now considered classics (Clockwork Orange, anyone?). The panic served a useful purpose for the video industry, which was largely unregulated at the time and quite liked the idea of being seen as a serious cultural force, rather than a medium for renting out soft porn and Westerns.

The same decade gave us the 'satanic' abuse panic, which is one of the more shameful episodes in the history of British child welfare. Daycare nurseries across the country were accused of being fronts for organised ritual abuse. Children were taken into care. Careers were destroyed. The panic spread through the United States first (where it had the additional benefit of conveniently distracting from the actual and well-documented problem of institutional child abuse by the clergy), but it crossed the Atlantic with enthusiasm. And very little in the way of actual evidence. What the children mostly were, on examination, was badly interviewed by social workers and psychologists who had already decided what the children would say before they ever said it.

The 1990s brought us the 'Rave' panic, which saw young people dancing to repetitive electronic music and popping 'E's, but described in terms that would not have seemed out of place in a nineteenth-century Temperance tract. MDMA, or Ecstasy, was going to melt the brains of a generation. Yes, there had been very tragic deaths, but the idea that the whole 'scene' was an existential threat was grossly overplayed. Police used powers under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to shut down raves. Politicians spoke of a nation under siege from a drug that had been, until rather recently, used in psychotherapy. The raves ended. The drugs continued. The nation did not fall. Young people continued to be young people in more or less the way they always had been.

The Grammar of Panic

What do all these panics have in common? Several things, actually, and they're well worth spelling out.

They always target **something new**. Something the older generation doesn't quite understand. Rock and roll. Video recorders. Rave music. The internet. Social media. Transgender people. The newness is not incidental to the panic; it is central to it. A threat you understand isn't very threatening. A threat that involves unfamiliar vocabulary and practices that your children seem to find thrilling is far more alarming. The novelty doesn't even need to be **actually** new: it just needs to be new to one's attention.

They are almost always about the children, even when they aren't really about the children. The figure of the endangered child is the most emotionally potent image in the human imagination. It bypasses rational thought almost entirely. Mention children and danger in the same sentence and people stop checking their facts. This is a feature, not a bug, for the people who manufacture panics.

They resist correction. Evidence does not end a moral panic. When the satanic abuse claims collapsed under the weight of their own chronic absurdity, the people who had promoted them did not apologise. They found new targets. When the video nasties list was successfully challenged in court, the panic simply moved on to other things. **The facts of the matter are simply not the point.** The panic is doing other work.

And they always end (eventually) with the regretful discovery that the thing wasn't **quite** as bad as all that. Sometimes the discovery is very gradual. Sometimes it's abrupt. The panic-related episode is assimilated into history, and something embarrassing is learnt. But it always comes, because the thing that was supposedly destroying public safety was never actually doing so. The panic was a social performance, and like all performances, it eventually ran out of audience. Until the next time.

The Current Episode

Which brings us, gently and inevitably, to the present. 2026 in all its technological glory.

The moral panic about **transgender people** that has developed over the past decade or so in the United Kingdom shares every characteristic of its predecessors. It targets something 'new' (at least, 'new' from within the current state of public ignorance) and very poorly understood. It centres, inevitably, on children. It resists correction in the face of overwhelming evidence. It serves the political interests of people who have very little else to offer. And it will, almost certainly, come to seem rather embarrassing in retrospect, as these things always do. It may take a **LOT** of time, but it will.

The parallels are not subtle. The **language** being used about trans people in the British media today would be recognisable to anyone who lived through the AIDS crisis, or the satanic abuse panic, or any of the other episodes in which a minority group was constructed as a threat to the social order. The photographs of demonstrators holding signs about protecting children from a threat that does not exist (in any statistically **meaningful** sense) are indicative. The **politicians** who find it easier to gesture toward a convenient 'enemy' than to address the actual causes of social dysfunction. The newspapers (and other media outlets) that have long known that outrage is a very **profitable** business model.

What is different this time is partly the specific group being targeted and partly the political context. The panic has found an unlikely home in parts of the left (or what passes for the left) in the contemporary Labour Party, which has been rather taken with the idea that it can win votes by being offensive to a minority that has no particular electoral presence or voting impact. It has found an even more natural alliance with the right, which has discovered that culture war is an **extremely** effective substitute for economic policy. Both camps believe, for different reasons, that trans people make ideal folk devils. Both camps are wrong.

The Silly Season; The Poison Years.

There is something almost comforting about the predictability of moral panics. They follow a grammar. They have a lifecycle. They begin with a genuine or manufactured alarm, develop through media amplification and political opportunism, reach a crescendo of absurdity, and then quietly dissipate when something new comes along to take their place.

We are, if the pattern holds, somewhere near the peak of the trans moral panic. The peak is characterised by maximum media coverage, minimum factual accuracy, and a supine political class that has found the issue useful for rather too many purposes to want it to go away. The descent will be slower than anyone expects. The embarrassing articles will not be written until long after the panic is over. The politicians who rode the wave will find other waves to ride. But they won't apologise. They might even claim they weren't even here.

But it will end. Because it always ends. The thing that was supposed to destroy us didn't. The children who were supposedly being corrupted grew up, more or less normally, into adults who ruefully remembered all the poisonous fuss. The threat proved to be entirely imaginary, or at least vastly smaller than the threat narrative suggested. And we moved on to the next thing, as we always do, because the British talent for finding something to be alarmed about is apparently inexhaustible.

What's wrong with moral panic? Essentially everything, assuming you're the sort of person who likes evidence, proportion, and the basic dignity of your fellow human beings. But they do make excellent historical material. Every decade or so, the world confronts its own absurdity and then, rather promptly, forgets it. This is both the great failing of public discourse and its saving grace. The panics end. The 'poison' years pass. And in the meantime, the people who were targeted by them are left to pick up the pieces, long after everyone else has moved on to the next outrage.

Still. At least it's not the hippies this time. I could never stand those flares.

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