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Bill Thompson
Hartwick College

Cecil Greek
University of South Florida, cgreek@usf.edu

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Mods and Rockers, Drunken Debutants, and Sozzled Students: Moral Panic or the British Silly Season?

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Bill Thompson¹ and Cecil Greek²

Abstract

Over the last decade, moral panic theory has affected a paradigm shift in the social construction of deviance and social problems in the United States, without any real debate about its viability. This article raises key questions about this perspective by offering the first ever critique of the seminal case study of British youth subcultures on which the paradigm is based. It argues that when analyzed in the context of contemporary criticism of vandalism, hooliganism, and delinquency, the Mods and Rockers case study never justified Cohen's original criteria for a moral panic.

Keywords

moral panic, Mods, Rockers, delinquency, hooliganism, media amplification

Introduction

This article concerns a classic book in the sociology of deviance, Stanley Cohen's (1973) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. Although Google Scholar records almost 4,000 citations since it was published, that does not reflect how popular the concept has become. It has generated a half-dozen text books, crossed over into popular culture, and will soon reach 1 million pages on a Google search (Thompson & Williams, 2012). Although the application of the label has been queried in specific cases (Cornwell & Linders, 2002; Critcher, 2003), no one has ever subjected Cohen's case study to critical scrutiny. However, the moment one compares Cohen's (1969) model to the historical record, his own dissertation on the subject, and even a close reading of *Folk Devils* to his model, it quickly becomes apparent that the public reaction to the clashes between the British Mods and Rockers youth groups in 1964 did not support either Cohen's description or definition of a moral panic. In short, the moral panic literature and the concept's popularity are built on an extremely weak foundation.

Descriptions and Definitions

If popularity were any guide, Stan Cohen's (1973) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* is Britain's major contribution to sociology, and the story of the Mods and Rockers has mesmerized criminology, media studies, a score or more of other disciplines, and even the rock group "The Who." As a result, it has become an international truism that a minor spat between two groups of bored youths at a decaying U.K.

seaside resort was turned by a distorted and exaggerated media account into an extremely irrational societal-wide reaction—a moral panic—increasing the deviancy it condemned while ignoring the moral boundary crisis that precipitated the panic, even though it never happened.

For two decades, U.S. scholars ignored Cohen's groundbreaking theoretical account of how societies create the deviancy that they condemn, reaffirm a consensus in values, and build unnecessary control cultures, preferring their own explanations, including moral enterprise (Becker, 1963), symbolic crusades (Gusfield, 1963), and crime waves (Fishman, 1978). However, the last decade has seen a paradigm shift, and "moral panic" has become the explanation without any debate over its viability, despite the growing number of awkward questions raised by evidential critics, rival paradigms, and even adherents aware that its weaknesses have become too obvious to ignore (Cornwell & Linders, 2002; Furedi, 1997; Garland, 2008; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995; Thompson, 1989, 1994; Waiton, 2008).

The major problem remains the very cause of its popularity: the complete lack of theoretical, definitional, and evidential integrity evidenced by the way the label has been applied to anything that appears to conform to Cohen's (1973)

¹Hartwick College, Oneonta, NY, USA

²University of South Florida, Tampa, USA

Corresponding Author:

Cecil Greek, Dept. of Sociology, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL, 33620

Email: cgreek@usf.edu

description of a moral panic rather than his *definition*, even though the former is generic to every other model of social problem construction:

- A social group or phenomena is defined as a threat to societal values in the media.
- The coverage includes denunciations of the folk devil/phenomenon by editors, religious leaders, politicians, and “experts.”
- “Ways of coping” are devised.
- The folk devil becomes embedded in the collective memory.
- Legal/social policy changes *may* follow. (Cohen, 1973, p. 9)

As a result, with one notable exception (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Robert, 1979), no one else has ever uncovered a moral panic as Cohen (1973) *defined* them in *Folk Devils*, which supposedly “contained all the elements from which one might generalize about *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*” (p. 11). The definition consisted of three “distinct but interlocking” phases involving an *interactive process* among the media messages, the general public, the social control agencies, and the folk devils, none of which appears or is implied in the description:

- Phase 1 involves the media coverage of the “precipitating event” that involves *Exaggeration* and *Distortion*, *Prediction* about further difficulties to come, and the *Symbolization* of the problem the folk devil represented.
- Phase 2 concerns the way the media coverage leads to the *Orientation* of public beliefs with the aid of *Images* of the folk devil that lead to new stigmatizing labels and a consensus over *Causation* explaining their behavior, and revolves around the subsequent *Sensitization* of the public and social control agencies to the problem making the problem look bigger than it is.
- Phase 3 covers the simultaneous increase in the *Societal Control Culture*, including new laws, and the role of *Exploitative Cultures* using the panic for their own ends.

These three phases also contained a vast array of “must have” features from the public dramatization of evil to the amplification of the deviancy that facilitates the nine “elements,” but as they were also generic to other perspectives, the defining feature of a moral panic was the “transactional process” between the parties involved over the three phases (Cohen, 1973, pp. 12-204).

Consequently, the popularity of the concept and the growing number of subsequent moral panics was a function of the use of the generic description that ensured that the moment an

academic picked up a newspaper and saw a horror headline followed by adverse moral comment and a politician demanding legislation, another panic was added to the paradigm’s catalog, even though the general public who were supposed to be panicking were none the wiser and could not have cared less (Thompson, 1989).

Despite the attempt of the U.S. variant of panic theory to circumvent these problems, it has only succeeded in making matters worse (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). As any sudden manifestation of a social group’s fears about another group’s behavior, lifestyle, or political perspective would appear *volatile* and involve a *consensus of concern* by “a segment of society” expressing *hostility* through “disproportionate” claims about the threat, the “new, improved” definition is even more generic than Cohen’s overworked description. Moreover, as this new definition no longer contains the rationales and justifications for the label *moral panic* that Cohen’s definition supplied, the concept no longer makes any sense (Thompson & Williams, 2012). Although this tendency was fueling the concept’s rising popularity in the United States during the 1990s, back in Britain, conservative ideologues were having a field day ridiculing the concept by demonstrating the panic paradigm’s failure to apply the label to progressive causes even though they frequently matched the generic description as well (Hunt, 1997).

This article draws attention to three major, interrelated, problems found in Cohen’s account that have subsequently shaped the paradigm and encouraged that political bias: (a) the panic paradigm’s reliance on theories about social action rather than the actors’ motivations; (b) the failure to establish quality control, including the 40-year failure to subject any of the seminal studies to evidential scrutiny testing their viability; and (c) the tendency of case studies to deliberately ignore countervailing evidence. We illustrate these problems by drawing attention to how several omissions from the historical record reveal that even Cohen’s initial case study that launched the model did not match his *description*, let alone his *definition* of moral panic.

The Contextual Background

According to Cohen (1973), despite the fact that the clash between the two youth groups at Clacton only made headlines because of a “slow news day” (p. 45), the coverage quickly led to the projection of extensive unarticulated fears about the “direction in which society was going” onto the Mods and Rockers (Cohen, 1973, pp. 29-43, 49-65). However, while the reports were exaggerated and distorted, they would not have generated public “confusion” about the meaning of the “ambiguous” event—the basis of the “panic” in the moral panic—because the news media had been full of stories about violent hooliganism and destructive vandalism for three long years, and little else in the weeks leading to Clacton.

Soccer hooliganism had become so prevalent between 1959 and 1963 that the government had established attendance centers to keep known hooligans away from the games, and as Clacton involved two rival factions fighting each other without concern for whom or what was in the way, it raised a *rational* fear that mass hooliganism would not end with the soccer season in May. Although home grown soccer hooliganism was nothing new, rising affluence had enabled groups such as the “Merseyside Maniacs” to attend road games and fight with the home team’s hooligans (Dunning, Murphy, & Williams, 1988, pp. 141-181; Taylor, 1971, pp. 156-157).

Then, when a 3-year-old girl’s drowning was blamed on an anonymous vandal who had broken the safety catch on a gate preventing unaccompanied children reaching the river Irwell in 1960, vandalism rivaled soccer hooliganism for media space and a popular indicator of delinquency, facts charted by a contemporary doctoral student, named Stanley Cohen (1969). By 1964, vandalism had become endemic as public and privately owned facilities from advertising billboards to schools came under attack. That nothing was sacred was demonstrated by the 250% increase in claims from vandalized churches between 1960 and 1964 (Cohen, 1969). This coverage was enhanced in the weeks leading up to Clacton with a series of horror headlines about dangerous and deadly vandalism, which would have ensured that Clacton would have made the front page even on a fast news day. A post office report highlighting the lack of access to emergency services because 70,000 public telephones were being vandalized every year was matched by another from British Rail concerning the 70% increase in derailments caused by vandalism over the previous 2 years. Consequently, when the Local Government Information Office released *The Cost of Vandalism to Local Authorities*, Cohen (1969) told us that its “get tough” policy ensured that the local media, pulpits, passing-out parades, and school prize-day speeches became preoccupied with vandalism (Cohen, 1969, pp. 131-138, 145-158, 161-166), and all that ensured that Clacton was the wrong time for Mods and Rockers to play vandals and hooligans in public.

The omission of this immediate context from *Folk Devils* is matched by the complete lack of any indication that the country was already in the midst of a debate over the causes of and solutions to delinquency, involving political parties, churches, charities, and other interest groups. The debate, which had preoccupied the country since the appearance of the Teddy Boy gangs in the early 1950s, had already led to six major inquiries and parliamentary reports between 1959 and 1963, and produced the competing explanations and solutions that Cohen erroneously claimed suddenly appeared after Clacton (Thompson & Williams, 2012). As a result, the only thing new about the Clacton coverage was putting a label, Mods and Rockers, on the previously anonymous vandals.

Likewise, although a moral “boundary crisis” definitely existed, Clacton could not have led to the “suppressed fears”

about the “permissive society” being projected on to the youths—the “moral” in the moral panic (Cohen, 1973, pp. 193-194), because the country had already divided into two camps over permissiveness during March 1963 following three very public scandals. The month was best remembered for the Profumo Affair that led to the resignation of the secretary of state for war following the exposure of his adulterous liaison with Ms. Keeler, who counted the Soviet naval attaché Yevgeny Ivanov among her paying paramours during a hot period of the cold war. Two other issues turned March 1963 into a Moralgate. The first was the acquittal on a manslaughter charge of a 16-year-old youth who had smashed a wine decanter over the head of the former chairman of the Labour Party, George Brinham, during an attempted molestation. That revelation and the fact Profumo lied to parliament about his affair led the public to question whether *any* politician maintained the same moral standards that they demanded from the masses. On top of that, March also saw the release of *Honest to God*, a critique of simplistic religious faith by the bishop of Woolwich, Dr. John Robertson. Conservative Christians, already upset by his role in the 1960 *Lady Chatterley* trial that destroyed literary censorship in the United Kingdom, were horrified that the virgin birth and resurrection were being debunked in front of a rapidly secularizing population, and even more so, with the bishop’s subsequent dismissal of the church’s sexual morals on prime time TV. As a result, the rationales for Britain’s moral laws disappeared overnight, not least because of the policy already adopted by director general of the BBC, Hugh Greene. Convinced that Britain was well on the way to becoming a pluralistic society, Greene ensured that all sides gained a hearing through the new medium of documentaries, lengthy but riveting studio discussions, and the path breaking satirical show *That Was The Week That Was*. These innovations ensured that the three scandals’ ramifications were debated in every home, unlike those of the 1920s and 1930s reprised by Blythe in his *Age of Illusion* published at the same time (Blythe, 1963; Greene, 1969; Howard, 1963; Whitehouse, 1971). The public reaction was far more dramatic than that provoked in the United States by Edward R. Morrow’s contemporaneous *Columbia Broadcasting Service* reports.

In the face of the subsequent maelstrom of mass discontent on all sides, *The Times*, Britain’s “establishment” mouthpiece led the media pack in flipping the existing discourse regarding Britain’s “social malaise” into a “moral malaise” by reminding its readers,

History shows that societies rise and fall, flourish and decay, by what they believe in and by what their way of life stands for. (February 11, 1963, cited in Howard, 1963, p. 18)

Unfortunately for the establishment, they were the only ones who were going to panic about this modern “fall of Rome.” Middle-class Oxbridge graduates had already

demonstrated their preference for gainful satire at the BBC rather than government service at the Foreign Office. The new corporate white-collar classes wanted more “permissiveness” too. They welcomed the deregulation of moral crimes that began in the mid-1950s, lapped up the likes of *Lady Chatterley*, lined up all nights in their thousands to buy the Denning Report on the Profumo Affair, and watched with glee as the champions of the “new morality”—as permissiveness was called at the time—bested the hapless defenders of the old on TV night after night. Meanwhile, the masses who preferred socialism to patriotism and Empire were refusing to stand for the national anthem when played at local cinemas screening cynical “northern realist” movies, amplifying the effects of the “kitchen sink” stage plays from “the angry young men” of the 1950s (Thompson & Williams, 2012). In such a climate, it would have been impossible for anyone to make anyone or anything, let alone the Mods and Rockers, the subject of a *societal-wide* reaction against permissiveness.

Although Clacton initially excited the “law and order” lobby, their involvement did not last long. The handful of spats on a couple of beaches over the next 3 years simply could not compete with the horror headlines about soccer hooliganism’s increasing casualty list and the rising body count from the London gang-land feud between the Krays and Richardson “firms,” the serial child killing Moors Murderers, and the shooting of three London policemen. Those developments ensured not only that “violence” replaced “youth” as the lobby’s metaphor for adverse change during this period (Chibnall, 1977, pp. 83-88, 93-94) but also that switch was used by the second seminal moral panic case study to explain the alleged panic over muggers (Hall et al., 1978). As a result, long before the last deck chair was put away in 1964, the only people left “panicking” about the youths were a couple of resort town’s traders associations, whose demands for action were invariably opposed by the police (Cohen, 1973, pp. 84, 118).

This missing contextual background has several ramifications for Cohen’s account of the way the media “inventory” covering Clacton was supposed to promote the moral panic.

The Inventory Explained

As vandalism and hooliganism were already receiving “grossly disproportionate” coverage compared with other crimes before Clacton (Cohen, 1969, pp. 139, 149), the column inches devoted to the Clacton reaction was not surprising. Most distortions recorded by Cohen followed on directly from the preexisting media frames, and the all-important “prediction” element with its supposed multiplier effect is explained by the fact that the youths added insult to injury by putting on a repeated performance the very next day. As a result, apart from naming and blaming the youths for the previously anonymous crime of vandalism, the media inventory could not have had the “new” meanings and subsequent effects Cohen (1973, pp. 31-39) accredited to them.

Likewise, far from representing a united philosophy as Cohen claimed, the same misreported incidents displayed in the press reports are explained by the fact that every article initially relied on the same source, a “stringer”: the local newspaper reporter who supplied the newswire services with a story they were willing to buy because of all the previous publicity about violent vandals. As that also explains why the initial reports concentrated on the “violence linked to vandalism,” “the cost of damage,” and “loss of trade” rather than the physical clash, it negates Cohen’s (1973) ability to assert that they offer proof of media irrationality (pp. 36-37). There was not anything new, different, or special about the news’ editorials and bombastic comments about the youths that then appeared, as they emanated from the marginalized law and order lobby frustrated that they were losing the delinquency debate in general and had just failed to stop the 1963 Children’s and Young Persons Act with its “soft options” for juvenile delinquents. In any event, the lobby’s indignation had far less to do with the youths’ disrespect for authority than their own resentment that their “natural ally,” the Conservative Party, then in government, was being just as liberal as the Socialist Labour Party. That political consensus also explains why, despite Cohen’s (1973) claims about the media “symbolism” (pp. 40-44, 115) having a dramatic effect, the press was really scraping the barrel by relying on an aging vicar, a youth worker, a probation officer, a marriage councilor, a psychiatrist, a headmaster, and a “pop star” to populate the moral barricades. The failure of any arch-bishops, cabinet ministers, shadow cabinet ministers, professors with research to cite, leaders of national associations dealing with youth, chairs of county government associations, senior police officers, and the headmaster and mistresses associations to appear in media discussions, when they usually led societal condemnation of deviants, was highly significant.

Reaction Phase I: Manufacturing Opinions and Attitudes

The second phase of the alleged moral panic involving the inculcation of the media inventory that orientates the public’s understanding of the problem reinforcing the folk devils’ role as a target for those unarticulated fears is also questionable as the causation offered *after* Clacton, from “boredom” to “potential cabalism,” was the same as that offered *before* Clacton for delinquency in general. Indeed, according to a long forgotten article, as every one of the new causes had also been thrown at the violent Teddy Boys 10 years before, their reappearance undermined Cohen’s claim they were related to his account of the context of the 1960s (Rock & Cohen, 1970).

Media inventories would be needless anyway given the public’s *personal* experience of endemic vandalism and soccer hooliganism that had already ensured that 84% believed that these manifestations of delinquency were symbiotically

linked (Cohen, 1969). The public could not have adopted the alleged “disaster orientation” of the media either, given that it did not appear in the contemporaneous press, but was a function of Cohen’s (1973, pp. 22-26) analytical framework. The only adverse disaster analogy that appeared at the time was a single reference made by one Brighton MP comparing the beachside invasion by the youths with the aftereffects of an earthquake, although the police were mindful of another analogy. They were determined to nip any potential trouble in the bud because of the recent “disaster” in Lima, Peru, when 200 soccer fans were crushed to death as the crowd attempted to escape from rioting hooligans and the police’s use of tear gas. As 10,000 youths swarming over the 20-foot-elevated promenade at Brighton was a serious safety threat, far from being heavy handed, the police believed that they were saving the youths from themselves (Cohen, 1973, pp. 51-52; see Hansard, House of Commons [HOC], June 23, 1964, pp. 274-277).

As we do not have the space to cover all the rationales Cohen offered for the successful inculcation of the media “images” despite the lack of any direct evidence (see the polemic rebuttal in Thompson & Williams, 2012), we draw your attention to three key problems. Less than a year after *Folk Devils*, Cohen admitted that although media accounts could set an agenda, no one could determine what conclusions the public would adopt (Cohen & Young, 1973, Part 3, Introduction). Cohen’s account relies on examples of pseudo-psychological explanations like mass hysteria and mass delusion found elsewhere around the world, which he suggested were at work in the United Kingdom also whenever he was unable to offer direct evidence. This was a doubly dubious practice given that whenever sociologists have examined these “explanations,” from *The War of the Worlds* radio panic of the 1930s to the satanic panic of the 1980s, they have always uncovered material explanations for what occurred (Lowery & DeFleur, 1983; Victor, 1993). Last but not least, far from panicking, the public responded to the horror headlines by pouring into Clacton the very next day *despite* the weather being the worst for 80 years. They continued to flood over the battle ground beaches all summer long *in spite* of all the predictions and “warnings” in the forlorn hope of catching the youths in action. Indeed, the rematch in Margate over the Whitsun holiday 7 weeks later dramatically increased hotel bookings *despite* the violence (Cohen, 1973, p. 31). However, the overdramatic reporting of “no shows” and “nonevents” by the newspapers in their desperate attempt to maintain interest in a flagging story ensured that it was not long before the disappointed public realized that the problem had been blown out of all proportion and was a storm in a tea cup. Beachside invasions were rare and concentrated in three resorts, Brighton in particular (Cohen, 1973).

Despite using a professional news clipping service, Cohen (1973) could not offer any evidence of similar disturbances at any of the other 50 resort towns from Bognor Regis in the

south to Whitby Bay in the north, although a couple of resorts used the publicity as an excuse to ban bongo bashing beatniks from their beaches. If anyone is exaggerating, it is Cohen. The minor rumbles at Brighton, Bournemouth, Great Yarmouth, Hastings, and Margate during Whitsun 1964 and the handful of Mod invasions of Brighton in the summer of 1965 meant that the Mods and Rocker phenomenon lasted a single summer, unlike the Teddy Boys who had caused general disorder in most U.K. cities and towns all year round as well as beach resorts during the summer season throughout the 1950s, as Cohen knew perfectly well (Rock & Cohen, 1970).

This major evidential shortfall is *not* solved by Cohen’s examples of the media attempt to “widen the net,” slapping the label *Mod* on unrelated incidents inland as there is no evidence that these alleged “follow-up stories” surpassed the usual number of reports covering “Friday night fighting” in the action-starved local press. As only one of Cohen’s (1973) examples alluded to “Mods” (pp. 79-80), and few people would have read them, these stories could not have amplified the panic nationwide. Indeed, as the police warnings only concerned the 3-day weekends known as *bank holidays* during the short U.K. summer season, and media attention disappeared the moment the 9-month soccer season started again, we are definitely dealing with a seasonal news theme. Between September 1964 and August 1967, the 1,500 reports sent to Cohen covering “vandalism/hooliganism” greatly outnumbered those referencing “Mods/Rockers.” Likewise, the number of drunken students *charged* with public disorder on the four Guy Fawkes Nights between 1964 and 1967 appears to have surpassed the total number of Mods and Rockers *arrested* at the beach resorts during the same period, making drunken students a greater threat. As Glasgow, Birmingham, and a dozen other major cities also initiated major antivandalism drives during 1965, this suggests that vandalism *per se* remained a far more important issue than the Mods and Rockers ever became (Cohen, 1969).

Another major omission, and perhaps the most important, ensures that although a sudden event “perceived as a dislocation of the social structure or a threat to cherished values” may lead to “debates about the implications rather than the event,” the Clacton reaction was nothing like Cohen’s (1973, pp. 49-54) theoretically determined one. Far from demonstrating that the Mods and Rockers became the perceived threat to the “careworn cherished values,” *Folk Devils* merely offers up that supposition that the reaction followed from the “possibility” that Britain’s adults “might” have perceived the Mods’ a sexual fashion, mobility, deportment, and posture of indifference “as something deeper and more permanent . . . the permissive society” (Cohen, 1973, p. 193). That possibility is belied not only by the ongoing debates over delinquency we covered above but also, more importantly, by the actions of the very people Cohen identified, correctly, as being most likely to be adversely effected: the evangelical Christian community personified by Mary Whitehouse and Lord Longford.

The response of the evangelicals and the old petit-bourgeoisie they supposedly represented was the complete opposite to the impression that Cohen gave his readers. Whitehouse initiated her counter attack against permissiveness immediately after the March 1963 Moralgate for precisely the reasons we outlined above, which is why her *Clean UP TV* (CUTV) campaign launched in May 1964 targeted Greene's propagation of the "new morality" at the BBC, gaining far more media coverage than the Mods and Rockers in the process (Whitehouse, 1971, p. 45, 51). Between then and May 1965, when the CUTV metamorphosed into the National Viewers and Listeners Association (NVALA), a permanent moral crusade against all forms of permissiveness in the media, Whitehouse still did not target the youths. As Whitehouse had become the symbol and voice of the antipermissive forces during this period, that deals a severe blow to Cohen's thesis (Greene, 1969; Whitehouse, 1977; Thompson, 1994). Cohen's (1973) erroneous inference that the evangelicals shared the same perspective as his single law and order informant "Blake" (pp. 126-132), on which his explanation for the panic relied, is also belied by another major omission from his account. Whitehouse's view of the youths was shaped by the U.K.'s independent chapter of Moral Rearmament that had launched a series of propaganda campaign posters via the *Daily Express*, explaining and expounding on what we would now call the "third way," the Christian position between capitalism and socialism, every couple of months. The one issued after Whitsun denounced the horror headlines, defended the Mods and Rockers, and even excused teenage drug taking and violence by placing the blame for delinquency on the "hypocritical" elite from priests to parliamentarians who had overseen Britain's moral decline during the last decade (*Daily Express*, May 14, 1964). As we have explained elsewhere, the motivating force behind that initiative and the NVALA was their fear that the decriminalization and normalization of sin, from birth control for unwed women to smut sold in main street stores, would encourage God's collective wrath on society (Greek & Thompson, 1992; Thompson, 1994). Longford, was a Christian-socialist MP and far from the "reactionary" of Cohen's caricature. He had chaired the Labour Party Education Committee that codified and promoted the most widely accepted explanation for delinquency during the 1960s, "the school leaver problem," which Cohen presented in *Folk Devils* as if it was his own and insisted had not been raised at the time (compare Cohen's, 1973, pp. 181-182, account with Hansard, HOC, June 23, 1964, pp. 239-240, 265-271).

Although it is always difficult to determine what "the public" is thinking, the third omission in this phase concerns the underreporting of the extent of "the differential reaction." Cohen dismissed the results of his own contemporary surveys as being "unrepresentative" of the wider public even though the sample of professionals in the control culture and another including residents of and visitors to Brighton would provide an excellent test for the inculcation of the media

inventory, which is why Cohen (1969, Part 3, p. 632) picked them. Contrary to the impression offered in *Folk Devils*, both samples rejected the media orientation; They did so in favor of their *existing* perspective, the meaning of which rarely matched the theoretical spin Cohen placed on them.

For example, when the professional sample referenced the generation gap that Cohen insisted was based on sexual and material jealousy of the younger generation to fit his explanation for the panic, the respondents offered competing rationales including the gulf in religious and moral sensibilities between the generations. The self-validating interpretations promoted by Cohen (1969, see Chapter 8) were only belied by other more comprehensive surveys (Cohen, 1969, p. 329; Musgrove, 1974, pp. 1-8); they help explain the core problem with the account offered in *Folk Devils*. Although the professional sample wanted the courts to "tighten up," that perspective was premised on reserving the courts for the *depraved* hard-core hooligan. They preferred to deal with the majority of *deprived* delinquents by retaining the informal controls of the past, like a clip round the ear by a British Bobby or the use of the cane in schools. Although Cohen (1969) denounced that as a "reactionary" (pp. 348-356) solution in his PhD, the professionals preferred those controls precisely because they wanted to avoid labeling and criminalizing troubled youth. In direct contradistinction to Cohen's (1969) expectation, the magistrates in the sample also rejected popular stereotypes and the "law and order" (p. 386) lobby's solution, preferring to judge each delinquent on the basis of their individual character, behavior, motives, and potential for recidivism. The wider sample, who blamed delinquency on materialism and other social factors, also wanted to reform the courts by reducing the gross overrepresentation of conservative Christian women on the magistrates' bench in favor of the working classes, schoolteachers, and youth workers who would understand the youths' problems (Cohen, 1969). Cohen's admission that he could not make sense of these positions reflects the fact that he made no attempt to study the philosophy behind them, because he simply divided the world into progressives and reactionaries. As a result, he never understood that far from being "inconsistent," the Christians in the professional sample rejected the vengeful nature of the "law and order" lobby and were wary of the psychological determinism being promoted by contemporary progressives because they feared that it would lead to the insidious forms of social control that Cohen (1985, 1969, p. 389) later lamented had occurred when it was far too late.

The Brighton public was equally dismissive of the media inventory, for although 33.9% believed that the youths were delinquent, 65.1% did not, and even those who did thought that the youths were no worse than any other (Cohen, 1969). The most important revelation, however, appeared in the professional sample's answers to a "scale of contemporary youth problems" in which they dismissed the Mods and Rockers as *less* of a threat to public safety than joy riders.

When asked to rank juvenile crimes, Mods and Rockers came in 9th out of 14 options. The professionals' priorities—(a) armed robbery, (b) vandalism on railway lines, (c) *armed* gang fights, and (d) taking drugs—demonstrated not only that they, like the masses, judged threats by the risk to life or limb but also that they were still being guided by the *pre-Clacton* vandalism inventory and their memory of the previous decade's highly publicized Teddy Boy knife fights (Cohen, 1969, Table 35). Readers need only examine the contemporary *Pathe* newsreels covering the Mods and Rockers, available now on YouTube (2010), to see why they did so. Despite the commentary invariably playing up the "threat" to justify its subject matter, the content demonstrated that this was no more than "a storm in a tea cup" and helps explain why this kind of media exaggeration and the Keystone Cop behavior fanned the flames of the widespread cynicism toward needless authority mercilessly lampooned by the *Monty Python* team who had also written for *That Was The Week That Was*.

These distortions in *Folk Devils* are surpassed by the bemusing oversight concerning the prehistory of the Rockers that explains what Cohen never did: why the youths clashed at Clacton. If the omission of the pre-Clacton inventory was odd, the possibility that the founder of the moral panic paradigm was unaware that the Rockers had already been subjected to two *generic description* panics before 1964 defies credulity. The first wave of adverse publicity labeled them *Ton-up boys* reflecting their obsession reaching "the ton," 100 mph, on the U.K.'s congested pre freeway roads in the late 1950s. They then metamorphosed into "Rockers" during the early 1960s at the Ace Cafe on London's North Circular Road, which they turned into their personal race track. These events attracted the attention of the "exploitative culture," in the form of Freeman's 1961 popular novel *Leather Boys*, which was turned into a 1963 exploitation movie featuring the Ace as a location. By then, however, the Rockers were facing competition on the roads from an armada of mobile Mods on their imported Italian motor scooters that they also used to invade the south coast resorts favored by the Rockers, making clashes inevitable and frequent during 1963. Although the press did not catch on to that development, the public definitely had evidenced by the way Britain's unofficial barometer of popular trends, Stock Exchange messengers, had adopted the rival monikers "Mod" or "Rocker" a year *before* Clacton (Petrolheads, July 26, 2004; Cohen, 1969, p. 591). As a result, the public would have had no problem differentiating between these members of highly organized motor cycle clubs, complete with membership cards, from the Mods *before* Clacton.

Collectively, these omissions from Cohen's account of the Clacton reaction is the equivalent of "explaining" U.S. foreign policy from Reagan onward without once mentioning Rumsfeld, Cheney, or the role of the neo cons and their new mission for America. In reality, the U.K. public were no where near as united in condemnation as Cohen contends,

and it would have been impossible to turn the youths into societal-wide scapegoats for permissiveness when most people didn't care. Those mobilizing against permissiveness had defended the youths, and the politically marginalized law and order lobby were more interested in counting dead bodies, rather than damaged scooters.

Reaction, Phase 2: Evidence Versus "Analysis"

As it is impossible to cover them all, we offer a representative sample of our reservations about Cohen's (1973, p. 78; see Thompson & Williams, 2012) account of the public and police sensitization to "any act that looked like hooliganism" that was then "invariably classified as part of the Mods and Rockers phenomenon." Soccer hooliganism continued to be considered a separate phenomenon despite consisting of the "hard-Mods," who quickly metamorphosed into the U.K.'s notorious skinheads, fighting each other. Cohen's (1973) best example of the supposed rise in false alarms reflecting the sensitization process was immediately dismissed by the police as "people getting jumpy after the trouble on the coast" (p. 79). Cohen's (1973) examples of "police panic" (pp. 79-80, 170), such as patrolling the Woking fun fair following a rumor of an impending invasion, are deliberately misleading, in this case because fun fairs were frequent sites of teen conflict. The "new" police tactics, supposedly adopted as a result of the panic were not new either, having been deployed against both the major political protest of the era, the "ban the bomb" marches, and mobile soccer hooligans (Driver, 1964; Dunning et al., 1988, p. 43). Likewise, the alleged "unprecedented national coordination" of the police response was nothing of the kind, as the all-important conference at the Home Office only included the chief constables from the five counties containing the invaded resort towns (Cohen, 1973, pp. 86, 148; Cohen, 1969, p. 550).

Although the "dramatization of evil" in the courts was true enough, it did not demonstrate an escalation in the control culture. As only 24 of the 97 Clacton arrestees were actually *charged*, and the criterion used to prosecute—a prior conviction—guaranteed a "harsher" penalty, the "increase" in penalties handed down after the Whitsun rematches were in line with the "seriousness of the offence," and there was nothing new about the deployment of the extralegal measures "making an example" of those who persisted in invading Brighton (Cohen, 1973, pp. 95-108); the courts' response does not support Cohen's claims at all, and his PhD thesis told a very different story about Brighton.

The claims about wrongful arrests were inflated by the typical yobbo's lying lament that they "were doing nothing." If they had bothered to educate themselves about the law and appealed the "no bail" conditions imposed, they would have gained instant release. Any police officer found to have been overreacting was reprimanded, and there was no repetition of the extralegal punishments once *The Times* denounced the

whole affair (Cohen, 1969). Indeed, it was the lack of any “crack down” that ensured the resort towns’ “law and order” lobbies were unimpressed despite all the rhetoric and continued to demand “more controls” over the 3-year period, evidenced by the type of complaint emanating from one License Victuallers Association (Cohen, 1973, p. 118). The only real “innovation” during this period was the airlift of police reinforcements to Hastings, although that too turned out to be a dud (Cohen, 1973, p. 86; Cohen, 1969, p. 486). Despite the dramatic voice over commentary you can see on YouTube, it was merely a means to get a back-up squad over the congested Bank Holiday roads, and as it failed in its primary intent, to reduce the rising overtime costs of keeping reserves on standby in each resort town, it was abandoned (see Cohen, 1969).

Once one notices that the survey in *Folk Devils* supposed to demonstrate that 81% of the public were demanding harsher penalties collapses to 18% the moment one removes inflation factors, such as limiting media coverage to reduce copycat behavior (Cohen, 1973; see Thompson & Williams, 2012), the only issue left to deal with is Cohen’s account of the in situ amplification of deviancy on Brighton beach. Intended to offer the “more sociological explanation” that negated the vicarious motives behind the public’s presence on the beaches, prove that the “differential reaction” was unrepresentative and illustrate how the youths’ enmity toward each other was generated by the panic; it collapses under the weight of the contradictions within it.

Before one even gets to the beach, the polarization by panic thesis is belied by the very horror headlines that supposedly provoked the panic. The labels *Mod* and *Rocker* could hardly have had the pejorative meanings accredited to them after Clacton by Cohen when resort town newspapers such as *Brighton Evening Argus* and the national bestseller, the *Daily Mirror*, were still not using the monikers *Mod* or *Rockers* in their Whitsun horror headlines 7 weeks later (Cohen, 1973, *Daily Mirror*, May 18, 1964). As anyone who read *Folk Devils* would discover, the contemporaneous condemnation in the reports tended to consist of derogatory generalizations like *The Daily Telegraph’s* attack on the “grubby hoards of louts and sluts” (Cohen, 1973, pp. 34-35, 55, 166). That lack of evidence for the immediate demonization of the *Mods* and *Rockers*, like many others, followed from the fact that Cohen’s thesis relied on his own composite of the media reports rather than a quantified content analysis, which would have undermined it. Second, Cohen’s assertion that the youths were not really polarized before the Clacton inventory rests on three contentious foundations. The first is that as both groups were “working class,” the polarization was innately exaggerated, even though that had never stopped rival youth groups from that class fighting over turf or loyalty to soccer teams. Second, Cohen set an impossible standard for polarization that never appeared in the press, the need for the youths to constitute two “highly structured opposing groups.” What ultimately undermines Cohen’s

polarization by panic thesis, however, is his reliance on the lack of the homogeneity among the *Mods* when it came to fashion, for if the *Mods’* lack of common fashion prevented the homogeneity required for polarization, that also ensures that the panic’s alleged effect never materialized either. As the different *Mod* subgroups’ fashion sense in 1964 undermined the media claim that they constituted a distinct group, the youths still only amounted to undifferentiated “crowds” in 1965, and the beach invaders denied being *Mods* in 1966, the polarization never appears in *Folk Devils* (1973, p. 187, 149, 200). What makes that contradiction all the more remarkable is that the moment one turns to Cohen’s (1973, p. 194) explanation for the panic, his “major factor” in the *Mods* ability to become the public scapegoats for permissiveness was their “sheer uniformity in dress.”

Likewise, Cohen wants us to believe that the *Mods*, who were apparently “bored” and “listless” with “no definite plans” once they arrived, were then led into deviancy by the media publicity that created the “expectation” that there would be trouble (Cohen, 1973, pp. 150-151), as if these “excitement seekers” needed to be told by the *Daily Mirror* that “delinquents throw deck chairs in the sea” or required the encouragement of the *Daily Express* to “knock old ladies over” while doing so. Yet the moment we turn to Cohen’s (1973) account of the context, we find that the *Mods* had deliberately taken their “own form of excitement” (pp. 161, 164-165, 182), violence, generated to relieve their uncaring capitalist cityscapes to the beaches with them. That admission makes far more sense given that these thugs’ “target could rapidly change from rockers, to beatniks, to police,” and failing that led to “fighting amongst themselves” (Cohen, 1973, p. 152, 157). The ultimate reason for rejecting the claim that none of this violence would have happened without the Clacton reaction, of course, is that the *Mods* had exhibited “their own form of excitement” at Clacton, not once but twice before the media inventory could have had any effect.

As the *Rockers*, as a group, were rarely in evidence after Whitsun 1964, and you do not turn a *Beatnik* into a *Mod* or a *Rocker* by telling him to “hit the road, Jack,” it is no wonder that Cohen’s account does not match Young’s definition of the deviancy amplification process found in his description of the police crack down on the dope smokers of Notting Hill, London (Cohen, 1973, pp. 105, 111; Young, 1971). In contrast to Young’s cops and dope smokers’ escalating reactions to each others’ behavior that lead to the creation of an extensive counter culture with a “critical political response” as well as an increase in the original deviance, turning the cops’ initial stereotype into reality, all Cohen (1973) can offer is unconnected reports of “Friday-night fighting” inland, the police picking on the wrong targets like *beatniks*, “no shows,” the standard level of sentencing in the courts, and the arrest of innocents who won appeals at Brighton (pp. 79, 84, 96-98, 80-81, 103). As none of that amplified the original deviance, beach fighting did not become part of the

youth groups' lifestyles, and counter cultures or political critiques with lasting effects did not appear, we are forced to agree with a contemporary doctoral student who declared that the concept of deviancy amplification "would be inappropriate" to apply to the Mods and Rockers (Cohen, 1969, p. 437). The same can be said of panic and parliament.

Today in Parliament

The major discrepancy between Cohen's account and social reality concerns the Malicious Damage Act introduced after the Whitsun clashes that increased the penalties for vandalism. According to Cohen, this "emergency measure" directed at the Mods and Rockers followed from the steady crystallization of the media inventory in the parliamentary responses. Although Taylor's resolution (April 15) and Gurden's motion (April 27) were too early for the media "symbolism" to do its work, the panic forced the home secretary to abandon his position that the law was adequate, and a statement to that effect (June 4) led to the Malicious Damage Bill (June 23; Cohen, 1973, pp. 133-134). However, as this explanation on which the panic paradigm was founded and has remained uncontested for 40 years is directly contradicted by the parliamentary record, it demonstrates that the panic paradigm is based on a myth that could and should have been exposed long before now.

Far from Taylor's resolution and Gurden's motion not reflecting the panic because of a lack of time, they both undermine it. Although the former demanded that the government take action to address the problem at Clacton, Taylor defined the problem as merely the latest example of delinquency, and the speeches during the latter denounced the media coverage and asserted that the Mods and Rockers were not even delinquent (Cohen, 1973; Hansard, HOC, April 27, 1964). The tone was set by Gurden himself despite being a reactionary. Having referenced the numerous committees and inquiries that constituted the national delinquency debate, including the government's *Delinquent Generations*, Gurden savaged the media inventory and promoted a "third way" solution: enforced compensation for any damage done (Hansard, HOC, April 27, 1964, pp. 31-40). Most of the MPs, however, were more interested in promoting their pet theories about the causes of delinquency that they had just learnt was about to become the subject of a Royal Commission. MPs Edelman, Snow, Fell (from the resort town Yarmouth), and Thomas who followed Gurden haggled over whether to blame U.S. TV shows and movies, hypocritical adults, the youths' lack of religious sensibility, or the "anomie of affluence"—a liberal Christian argument long before Simon and Gagnon turned it into a sociological one (Hansard, HOC, April 27, 1964, pp. 43-45, 48, 55-56, 63-64, 72-73; Simon & Gagnon, 1976). Snow and Bence targeted capitalist materialism, whereas Thompson, being a conservative, opted for parents' spending more time in bingo halls and bowling alleys than raising their children (Hansard, HOC, April 27, 1964).

For our purposes, the most important contribution was from the opposition spokeswoman, Miss Bacon. Having pointed out that the problem at Clacton could be accredited to a small hard core, she launched into a discourse on the classless nature of delinquency. Although Cohen had jumped on that contemporary motif as evidence of the widespread irrational misconception that the Mods and Rockers delinquency was caused by the youth's affluence, he misled his readers regarding its origins and effect. The belief that delinquency was "classless" was a political critique of the law and order lobby, evidenced by Bacon's argument that as there was no difference between the worst beachside behavior and that frequently exhibited by drunken upper-class debutants or sozzled students from the middle classes, singling out working-class youth was unacceptable in a modern society. As Bacon also reiterated the findings of the Longford Committee concerning the need to offer more help for working-class teens during their transition from school to work because of recent structural dislocation (Hansard, HOC, April 27, 1964), she dealt Cohen's thesis a double blow.

Mr. Brookes agreed and argued that Clacton was merely a manifestation of the wider problem of hooliganism, and the media coverage was completely false (listing several reasons that Cohen would later use); that was why no new law was needed, and he would continue to try and reduce the number of teens going to jail. He then took the opportunity to announce that his preferred means was to get his advisory committee on delinquency to canvass the teen perspective on "the stresses and strains caused by the changing British society" to find a solution for delinquency (Hansard, HOC, April 27, 1964, pp. 80-87).

The constant references to the wider delinquency debate, the common criticism of the horror headlines, and the reasons given for rejecting the law and order lobby's demands in the press clearly undermine Cohen's excuse about timing. The speeches reveal that the MPs not only rejected the horror headlines but also had a very different agenda. Having already debated the wider issue of delinquency for 4 years, they were raising the issues that they hoped would be addressed by the Royal Commission, which were, as they are now, a major device for justifying new directions in legislation, and the debate clearly inferred that its findings would be liberal in keeping with the times.

Cohen's assertion that the Malicious Damages Bill that followed targeted the youths, and reflected a change of heart because of the moral panic, rests on four arguments. The first is that Brooke informed the House during the debate,

I want this Bill *also* to be a reassurance to the long suffering public. (Cohen, 1973, p. 137, emphasis added)

The second concerned the increased number of MPs addressing the beachside disturbances, and the Mods and Rockers in particular. The third is his data-less assertion that legislatures adopt tangential measures against folk devils

because they prefer “affirmations and gestures” that “aligns oneself symbolically with the angels” without taking up “cudgels against the devil” because “at times of moral panic, politicians in office . . . often act to calm things down” (Cohen, 1973, pp. 136-138). The fourth is that as parliament knew that the amount of damage was slight, “whatever the ‘devil’ was in the seaside resorts, it was not primarily vandalism” (Cohen, 1973, p. 138). The first is misleading and the other three offer perfect examples of the academic construction of reality.

Despite the publicity surrounding the Whitsun rematch, as only 9 of the country’s 650 MPs tabled parliamentary questions that tend to reflect comment and complaint coming from their constituents, that number proves that there was no societal-wide panic. However, although the government rejected the proposals contained within the questions because it believed the present law was adequate, the question from Taylor forced the home secretary to take the unusual step of making the Seaside Resorts (Hooliganism) Statement, although not for the reasons that Cohen claimed.

The eagle-eyed Taylor had noticed that the penalty updates covering the inflation of the last 50 years in the pre-Clacton Criminal Justice Act had overlooked Section 14 of the 1914 Criminal Justice Administration Act (Hansard, HOC, June 4, 1964). That meant that magistrates were still restricted to the £20 compensation limit set in 1914, undermining the parliamentary preference for solution by restitution and justifying the resort towns’ indignation that the law was not tough enough. Being unaware of the oversight when he declared that the existing law was adequate, Brooke apologized for that drafting error and announced that he would raise the penalty and compensation level for acts of vandalism to £100 each, matching the other previous updates. However, by also taking the opportunity to repeat his vehement opposition to further legislation, the home secretary also demonstrated that he never changed his mind (Hansard, HOC, June 4, 1964).

As the parliamentary record proves that the Malicious Damage Bill was merely an amendment correcting a drafting oversight in a pre-Clacton act, and had nothing to do with Cohen’s convoluted reasoning about emergency measures, “aligning with angels,” or attempts to “calm things down”, it demonstrates how far Cohen’s analysis of the whole affair is divorced from reality, and as the real reason for the act appears in his PhD, it raises awkward questions about all those other omissions.

Far from embracing the media inventory, as every MP agreed that the oversight had to be resolved, there was no “debate” over the Malicious Damage Bill at all. Instead, they used the opportunity to bury the media inventory and dismiss the law and order agenda by drawing a clear distinction between the Mods and Rockers and real delinquents. As far as Brooke was concerned, the youths’ only crime was to have allowed their high spirits to provide cover for a few

hard-core hooligans, and that “reassure” comment that Cohen exploited concerned reassuring anyone worried about invasions that the law was adequate as he had claimed it was because the oversight was being addressed (Hansard, HOC, June 23, 1964, pp. 239-242). Miss Bacon readily agreed, and attacked the “law and order” lobby. The first backbench MP to speak, Morrison, despite having reservations about her account of the difference between delinquents and criminals suggested those complaining about the teens should engage in voluntary service to help solve the school leaver problem (Hansard, HOC, June 23, 1964, pp. 250-253). Fitch believed that the amendment would help stop vandalism in parks and on the railways, and the charter trains soccer hooligans took to road games, as well as the beach side (Hansard, HOC, June 23, 1964). Teeling from Brighton was still in favor of labor camps, a demand favored by his town’s “law and order” lobby, but now sought to justify it as the best means of ensuring that compensation was paid and castigated the media too (Hansard, HOC, June 23, 1964, pp. 256-263). Reg Prentice having condemned the “pompous editorials” over Whitsun then offered the explanation for deviancy that Cohen passed off as his own in *Folk Devils*: Some of those labeled failures in an increasing meritocratic society took their frustration out on society (Hansard, HOC, June 23, 1964, pp. 265-271). Gardner then recorded his preference for compensation rather than harsh penalties (Hansard, HOC, June 23, 1964), and Brighton’s David James, despite his preference for confiscating the youths’ driving licenses, also championed recompense (Hansard, HOC, June 23, 1964). While Awdry didn’t like the way the Longford Committee had blamed capitalism for the youths’ “acquisitiveness,” and like other MPs in both debates bemoaned the baneful influence of the “new morality,” he was not in favor of a return to corporal punishment or any other severe measure either (Hansard, HOC, June 23, 1964, pp. 278-279).

Paget then made the speech of the day. He debunked the media claim that the Mods and Rockers were a serious problem by pointing out that the casualty departments in the resort towns had remained empty, and then argued that because these “exuberant types on holiday” were not even delinquent, they “need to be treated differently.” After paying compensation, “that was where the matter should end”—not that Paget was going to stop there, because when it came to Mods and Rockers, he believed that the real offenders were the resort town magistrates:

These young chaps must pay for the damage they do. . . . But I deplore the idea adopted by some magistrates and canvassed and applauded in the newspapers of sending young men of this sort to prison. That is a lamentable answer to this sort of performance. We have also had hysterical observations about Sawdust Caesars. These people are nothing of the sort. (Hansard, HOC, June 23, 1964, p. 280)

After another MP had backed “proper compensation” (Hansard, HOC, June 23, 1964, pp. 281-282), the parliamentary scourge of permissiveness, Rees-Davis, MP from Margate, rose to speak. He began by reminding the house that the Mods and Rockers had turned up in his constituency over Whitsun, but far from use that as a spring board to promote the media inventory, he denounced the coverage too, reinforcing the fact that contemporary antipermissives did not target the Mods and Rockers as a symbol of permissiveness at all (Hansard, HOC, June 23, 1964). Mr. Curran being a libertarian wanted to know why the government did not use restitution as the major means to combat lawlessness as well as vandalism (Hansard, HOC, June 23, 1964). Fletcher, being an old school Christian socialist, appealed for “more harmless sporting diversions for youth” after school (Hansard, HOC, June 23, 1964, pp. 293-295). Miss Pike, the under secretary for the home department, then closed the debate by promising “more imaginative sentencing” and, in direct contradistinction to Cohen’s claims, reiterated that as the police’s *regular, existing* machinery for dealing with outbreaks of disorder was working, no new measures were needed (Hansard, HOC, June 23, 1964, pp. 301-305).

Rather than reflect the “crystallization” of the media inventory (Cohen, 1973, p. 136), the content of the speeches referencing the disturbances reveal that the MPs raised the issue to make *favorable* comparisons between the beach invaders and other types of hooliganism. The nearest one who gets to Cohen’s inference about the debate was Teeling, who hoped that the amendment meant that the invaders would get an “unpleasant surprise” if they were caught vandalizing Brighton again. Otherwise, Rees-Davis merely recorded their appearance in Margate, Fitch wished that the Rockers would engage in charity rides on their bikes, Morrison explained that he was “full of admiration” for the younger generation, Prentice wanted to record that “it is a rather a brave thing to be a rocker” given they were so outnumbered, Gardner made distinctions between criminals and the beach invaders, and Paget pointed out that as young men were always fighting among themselves, the disturbances were nothing new or unusual and did not amount to criminality.

Making Sense of Panic Theory

As the omitted historical evidence clearly undermines Cohen’s account, *Folk Devils* is far more misleading than the contemporary media reports. As we have demonstrated elsewhere, as the same critique applies to five other seminal U.K. moral panics, the paradigm has created a completely false picture of British society since the 1970s (Thompson & Williams, 2012). In Cohen’s case, far from being swept up in a *societal-wide* moral panic directed at the Mods and Rockers, the public, the opinion formers, the moral entrepreneurs, and the parliamentarians not only dismissed the horror headlines but also denounced them. By 1964, British

society was so divided over “the way things were going” that common agreement on anything was impossible.

The most generous explanation we can offer for the lack of evidential integrity in *Folk Devils* is that it reflects Cohen’s determination to impose U.S. theories on circumstances that could not support them. Although the U.K. delinquency debate echoed that seen in the United States between 1950 and 1961, U.S. sociologists could justify their claim that delinquency was a social construction because it reflected a status “crime wave” caused by altering the age at which teens could access adult pleasures, such as the drinking age (Gilbert, 1986). Hard-core hooligans in the United Kingdom, however, managed to generate an increase in mass hooliganism and destructive vandalism without any societal encouragement—hence the divergence between U.S. theory and British experience, such as the alleged power of the press to stigmatize and the overemphasis on the supposed projecting gang membership on miscellaneous youths, which Cohen took from Wilkin and Yablonski, respectively (Cohen, 1969). As the initial Clacton reaction reflected the existing media frames about vandalism and hooliganism, and the coverage about nonevents only appeared over the bank holiday weekends at a handful of resorts during the short U.K. summer season, the media furor over Mods and Rockers is a perfect example of the “silly season,” when news stories become even more overblown than usual because the sources of most hard news, from the Royal Courts to Parliament close down for summer vacations. Nothing more.

When we first drew attention to the core weakness of the moral panic paradigm (Thompson, 1989, 1991), our fear of uncritical promotion in the United States was dismissed on the grounds that “it couldn’t happen here,” but it has. This demonstration of the failings of the original *definition* makes it imperative to question the generic description and the “new, improved” U.S. variant given that neither can distinguish between a moral panic and any other kind of adverse reaction to social groups or phenomenon. Unless one considers the real similarities and differences between moral panics and the alternative U.S. models rather than treat them as similes (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994), the potential political ramifications in the next decade could be far more costly than its existing effects on academic standards.

By maintaining Cohen’s simplistic division of the world into progressives and reactionaries, omitting vital countervailing evidence, while misreporting, distorting, and exaggerating what remains, the panic paradigm has constantly misled its readers regarding “the way society is going.” In this case, Cohen failed to consider how during the 1960s U.K. Christians—in the professional sample, among the moral entrepreneurs, and parliamentarians—acted as a bulwark against the law and order lobby. When one’s analysis of events can be so wrong, the political response is unlikely to secure its intent. As we first attempted to warn the United States that the need to critique panic theory was more than an academic dispute (Thompson, 1989), events have confirmed

our fears (Thompson & Williams, 2012). It is no accident that the increasing popularity of the panic paradigm with its mismatch between theory and reality has run parallel with the alienation between progressives and the working classes in the United Kingdom, with disastrous results (Jones, 2011; Waiton, 2008). With the United States at the cross roads, its time the panic paradigm here paid attention to Pally's (2011) revelations about U.S. evangelicals too.

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Bios

Bill Thompson has taught at Cambridge, Essex, and Reading Universities in the United Kingdom, and State University of New York and Hartwick College in the United States. As a practicing associate of the British Academy of Experts, he helped build United Against Injustice and uncovered 200 miscarriages of justice in the United Kingdom.

Cecil Greek has previously taught at Florida State University and is currently a member of the sociology department at the University of South Florida in Tampa. He has previously published on doing visual research, the relationship between criminology and film, and antipornography campaigns.