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## Trump, Moral Panics and Resistance

By Dave Brotherton  
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From the outset of Donald Trump’s campaign for the Presidency the infamous New York billionaire made it clear that the tactic of moral panic would be his chosen route to making it all the way to the White House. Like many politicians of the wealthy classes before him, threatening images of the “dangerous classes” were used wantonly to illustrate the common sense behind his ultra-conservative solutions to social and economic problems caused by fundamental disenfranchisement, inequality and poverty. Thus, the Trump campaign have treated us incessantly to scabrous descriptions of human beings who are supposedly arrayed against our innocent American sensibilities. They came thick and fast in the form of immigrant Mexican rapists, black urban gang bangers, Latino drug dealers and Muslim terrorists, among others. In each case, of course, it was always Donald the righteous who would save us from ourselves and thereby from these modern day “folk devils.”

Trump would not be the first Republican Presidential candidate to employ such tried and tested racialized “others” to reach the desired levels of fear and loathing among his supporters. Nixon in 1968 invoked the image of the “silent majority” encircled by rioting urban blacks and rampaging students, Reagan in 1976 used the specter of the black “welfare queen” to symbolize the “waste” of the entitlement system, George H. W. Bush in 1988 conjured the black rapist in the guise of Willie Horton to highlight the misplaced liberalism of his challenger Michael Dukakis, while George W. Bush appealed to the ongoing enemy of post-9/11 Islamic terrorism to shore up his inept time in office. But no one other than Trump has so brazenly, single-mindedly

and arguably successfully used the moral panic strategy to advance his ambitions for public office.

Why then has this tactic of systematic lies, distortion and hyperbole gone from being so effective in the earlier stages of his presidential run now to be in tatters such that a journalist at Trump's first solo press conference after just over three weeks in the job asked him, "Why should America trust you?" Meanwhile, as of writing, the renowned Pew Research Center announces that Trump's approval ratings are once more at "historic lows" and hitting the 39 percent mark, in stark contrast to Obama who was getting 64 percent during the same time in his first presidency and even George W. Bush who was at 53 percent during his initial go at playing commander-in-chief.

To understand this turn of events it is important to consider how the pioneers of the concept saw the moral panic as a process with a life cycle and not at all as a "big lie" machine that was entirely sustainable. They all pointed out that the groups, persons or communities singled out by "right thinking people" through scapegoating and stereotypification reflected unresolved social anxieties produced by a social control system unable to base itself any longer on a moral consensus. They concurred that the more a regime depends on moral panics to govern the more it undermines its own legitimacy which is precisely what we are witnessing in the present White House melt-down. Such a regime through its addiction to its own rhetoric eventually sews the seeds of its own destruction.

Several British sociologists were at the forefront of this research. Stan Cohen, one of the first to coin the phrase while describing the media frenzy in the '60s over brawling English "mods and rockers" saw that it was youth's embrace of hedonism and consumption undermining the message of disciplined work and restraint that was really at stake. Jock Young, who studied the public condemnation of "drug-takers" during the same period, concluded that the social interventions did more harm than the so-called "deviant" behavior (the U.S. War on Drugs is an ongoing example). Meanwhile, Stuart Hall described Margaret Thatcher's discovery of young black "muggers" terrorizing English inner-cities as more about her commitment to be the virus that killed socialism and the global project of hyper-wealth concentration and inequality (what we now call "neo-liberalism") than any concern over crime rates. Consequently, moral panics are never things in themselves no matter how self-serving. Further, they will always eventually motivate much larger sectors of society to question the legitimacy of both the diagnoses and policies that follow while encouraging new bonds of solidarity with those populations most targeted and vilified.

What we currently witness therefore is a moral panic process that instead of functioning as a unified narrative that constantly injects momentum into the various apparatuses of ideological production, pushing us ever closer to the practices of tyranny and dictatorial necessity, instead becomes the very object of our scorn and disbelief. This growing opposition to the cynical manipulation of our fears and vulnerabilities, whether real or imagined, in turn prompts us to envision a quite different world in which to resolve our social discontent and political unhappiness.

We see this with each Trumpian Punch and Judy show, a debilitating spectacle that has become both the form and essence of the Presidential regime. In response we, the people, recoil in disgust and amazement at the level to which our fellow human beings have debased themselves while we also begin to realize and accept the fallacy of our political fantasy, i.e., that we have been living in a world that pretentiously refers to itself as fundamentally democratic.

In other words, the dialectics of the moral panic now ensure that we not only participate in the death agony of what one Guardian writer describes as “a terrible mistake” but in the unraveling of society’s general fabric. It is not that the Emperor has no clothes but rather the whole neo-liberal project becomes revealed in all its stark naked ugliness along with the body politic that has enabled it. These are definitely new times. From where I sit the removal of Trump and his gaggle of know-nothings will only be the beginning as we enter a time when the future is truly up for grabs.