The Thieves of Happiness, the Thieves of Reason

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How does the language of blame work in times of neo-liberalism and economic crisis? Is moral panic still a useful concept, despite all the criticism that has formed against it? How does moral panic affect its objects? The study 'Anti-Polish Migrant Moral Panic in the UK' brings into focus some very valuable contributions to answering these questions. It also gives rise to two other questions: Can the various representations of 'folk devils' that surface in times of crisis be compared? What relationship can be identified between moral panic, cultural hegemony and political action? Below I shall attempt to address these questions.

I shall first reconstruct the conceptual and methodological basis of Fitzgerald and Smoczynski's study and then outline possible areas of comparison with my own research on the moral panic whipped up about Czech Roma during times of crisis. To close I shall revisit the concept of hegemony, which seems to have disappeared from moral panic research today, and propose a way of making this concept analytically fruitful again.

The challenge of prudentialism

Fitzgerald and Smoczynski's study focuses on the moral panic associated with Polish migrants in the United Kingdom. However, it differs from classic studies of moral panic in that it does not focus on a limited segment of time, but covers a longer perspective, capturing developments in time and some acceleration of panic, especially after the onset of the economic crisis in the late 2000s. And, as the authors emphasise, in this case the image of the 'folk devil' is not an expression of society's irrational fears. It is instead a reaction to threats that may be perceived as real and serious by a broad section of British society. What kind of fears, rationality, and reality does this situation reveal?

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The authors use the concept of prudentialism, formulated by Pat O'Malley and adapted to the context of moral panic by Sean Hier. Prudentialism is a moral reason of neo-liberal capitalism. It is an individualised response to risk society. This kind of moral rationality forces the individual to secure and insure herself against various possible risks, which she should rationally evaluate and calculate [cf. O'Malley 1996; Hier 2008]. Thus, risks and the protection of the individual from risk lie within the sphere of individual responsibility and calculus. Protection against risk is associated with individual success in the market and the related ability to act 'prudently'.

The risk society is thereby connected to the individualisation and de facto break-up of society (cf. on the risk society, Beck [1992]; on the break-up of society, Buden [2013]). While, on the one hand, society is breaking up and moral rationality is becoming distinctively individualised, on the other hand, there is still a clearly identifiable collective threat, the 'folk devil'. This means we can accept the risk society diagnosis but still not agree with Seldon Ungar [2001] that the risk society ushers in an essential change to the object of panic. Based on Beck's analysis of the risk society, Ungar predicted the transformation of moral panics; according to him, types of panic in the future will lack a clearly defined collective enemy and will focus on a particular phenomenon, not a group (such as the panics surrounding nuclear power or BSE). However, I would argue that his prognosis has not been confirmed yet. The panic that came to surround Islamist terrorists after 2001 and the panics that relate to various other social groups (the unemployed, poor, migrants, Roma, oligarchs, politicians) or whole states (Greece), panics that amplified in connection with the recent economic crisis, clearly demonstrate that panic needs the 'human face' of a particular group that can be held responsible.

The description Fitzgerald and Smoczynski give of the moral panic associated with Polish migrants explores a situation, in which the risk society and the logic of prudentialism lend a certain rationality to something that, on its surface, looks like pure ethnic animosity. Migrants can be perceived as symbolising the pressure that not only destroys jobs and the chance of a proper life, but also deprives someone of the opportunity to respond prudently to these risks. For a section of the British working class, a Polish migrant signifies a risk, against which British workers cannot insure themselves, and which may also undermine their ability to insure themselves against all other risks.

The double mirror

The authors follow the 'Canadian turn' in moral panic research. They choose an approach different from most studies of moral panic, which tend to focus on media image, the statements of politicians, or the publicly articulated 'voices of the people'. In contrast, Fitzgerald and Smoczynski turn to voices from below and analyse not what the actors of a panic say about themselves, but what the targets say. Whereas interviews with the actors of a panic might offer insight into

their motivations, it would be limited to what the actors themselves are willing to say about themselves. In Fitzgerald and Smoczynski's approach moral panic is recognised through its key instance: how it impacts the objects of its enmity. Moral panic is recognised through the gestures, grins and attacks that target Polish migrant workers. Moral panic is depicted through the fear that Polish workers feel when they speak Polish in public, through the masks they use to succeed in a society whose relationship with them is shaped by panic.

The advantages of this approach are clear: instead of analysing the 'representations' that circulate in the media during episodes of moral panic, we are presented with a description of its effects on social life. Instead of concentrating on those actors with access to the public media, this analysis focuses on the voices of panic's targets. Instead of motivation, it focuses on action. Research on moral panic that follows the 'Canadian turn' entails the use of a double mirror, because moral panic is analysed from the reactions it causes.

However, it is possible to identify one problematic aspect of the otherwise impressive approach in Fitzgerald and Smoczynski's article, which is the rather inorganic combination of two perspectives. The core of the article comprises quotes from Polish migrants to such an extent that the resulting impression is that the main message of the text has crumbled into individual empirical descriptions of the particular problems these migrants face. This is supplemented with rather authoritatively formulated arguments stating that this panic cannot be perceived as irrational and produced from above, because it is an essentially rational reaction to risks felt by working and unemployed Britons. The authors use statistics and the concept of prudentialism to support their arguments, but they do not use empirical material as plastic as that used to reconstruct the living conditions of Polish workers. The article thus almost seems to break into two: On the one hand, the authors reconstruct the logic of British opponents of Polish migration, but without providing empirical insight into their motivations. On the other hand, they present a rich empirical study of the impacts of panic on Polish workers, but without any conclusions beyond pure description.

Polish workers in the UK and 'inadaptable' Czech Roma

In the Czech context there is no comparable moral panic in times of crisis that targets migrants 'stealing jobs' from the native population. The main reasons are probably the much smaller scale of migrant work and the very strict stance the Czech government adopts towards migrant workers during crises. And where migrant workers participate in the labour market and have a negative impact on the employment rate or labour standards of their 'native' colleagues (e.g. assembly-line work in large factories), instead of a panicked amplification of the problem we find little or no media coverage of the issue at all. Episodes bearing the characteristics of moral panic relating to migrants have occurred in connection with problems of coexistence with people with different cultural patterns

(Mongolian workers) or suspected of questionable commercial practices, mafianism and of posing a threat to the public (Vietnamese tradespeople). The strongest moral panic aimed at migrants has been the persistent and reinforced fear of Islam. This panic has no direct connection to labour or crisis, and it is much more a combination of local identification with the West, identitarian panic and the fear of terrorism. There are only a few thousand Muslims in the Czech Republic and only some of them are migrants.

In the Czech Republic, a distinct form of moral panic connected to work and crisis is the panic churned up around the 'inadaptable Roma', accused of engaging in violent crime and living on social benefits. Here we can see important differences from the situation of Poles in the UK. First, the Roma are not migrants. The negative attitudes towards them are traditional, and climaxed once in the early 1990s and again in the mid-2000s [cf. Stewart 2010]. In times of crisis attitudes have worsened and given rise to new waves of violent anti-Roma demonstrations in some regional towns, demonstrations in which ordinary people participated. The second important difference is the relationship to work. The Roma are not stigmatised as thieves of jobs but, on the contrary, as an amoral group that avoids work and lives on social benefits (and these are their most important sins). There is also a third important difficulty in the comparison—we do not have any adequate comparable research. My own research is based on the concept of moral panic, but in its older, traditionalist applications, and focuses on the media image of the 'inadaptable Roma' [Slačálek 2014]. Probably the closest piece of research in terms of the methods used by Fitzgerald and Smoczynski is an activist study conducted by Kolektivně proti kapitálu (Collectively against Capital), which used the 'inquiry' method,[1] carrying out *in situ* interviews with participants of anti-Roma demonstrations [Kolektivně proti kapitálu 2013].

Like Fitzgerald and Smoczynski's study, it is also possible to analyse the dialectical relationship between reality and fiction in the case of attacks on 'inadaptable' Roma: problems of coexistence and the abuse of social welfare correspond with experienced societal problems. But violent behaviour and the abuse of social welfare have come to be portrayed as characteristic of the Roma as a whole, and this re-creates the fantasmatic image of the Roma as 'inadaptible' (and through its implicit inversion also fantasmatic image of Czechs as hard-working).

The Roma are attacked on the basis of the dominant ideology of productive labour and the ideology that one must work and nothing is for free. As Collectively against Capital notes, this position is the result of an erroneous class perception: people who are occasionally unemployed or who have unemployed relatives support an ideology that will make their situation worse. The reason is the attractiveness of this ideology and the availability of the Roma as an example

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[1] Inquiry is a method of activist research based on Italian *operaismo*. It has been used prevalently to analyse factory-workers' perceptions of their circumstances. The key part of this approach is interviews conducted by activists [Shukaitis, Graeber and Biddle 2007].

of people who violate its key principles. Criticism of the Roma may be the only enduring platform, where poor and occasionally unemployed whites can identify with the dominant ideology [Kolektivně proti kapitálu 2013]. My research concludes that Roma are perceived as a minority protected by elites and thus they become an attractive compensatory target *instead of elites*: when they are attacking those 'below', the anti-tsiganists are actually targeting those 'above', protests against the Roma are an opportunity to articulate many 'rational' demands concerning problems of coexistence, but also other issues, particularly their own spatial marginalisation. The 'elites in Prague' are viewed as the 'protectors of Gypsies' and at the same time as a hindrance to the development of the regions. The articulation of a racist approach becomes both an unacceptable political declaration and one of the few ways in which to call attention to the problems experienced by marginalised regions, in a manner that appeals to the media and policy-makers in the centre. This approach entails adopting an ambivalent stance towards the dominant ideology, as it refuses some of its elements (anti-racism) and accepts others (the culture of productive labour).

In this situation, 'rational' and 'irrational' elements are closely connected. People articulate their collective interests, and relate them to the image of the enemy—the 'inadaptable' Roma. These Roma are not perceived as competitors in the labour market, but as a challenge to the social order, a key part of which is the labour market. At the same time, this behaviour is understood as devastating for the life of the region as a whole, and the mere presence of Roma signals the presence of a ghetto and a second-rate life. At the same time the image of 'inadaptability' challenges both the popular and the official concept of justice—a life on social benefits is regarded as an economic problem of resource scarcity in society and (what is even more important) as a moral problem—the 'abuse' of benefits, support for a parasitic lifestyle, and the absence of values connected to labour.

A return to hegemony?

Goode and Ben Yehuda categorised theories of moral panic according to their hypothesis about the origin of moral panic. According to one theory, moral panic is a product of elites. A second group of theories underlines the role of middle-class activist groups or the media. The third theory focuses on the role of activities 'from below' [Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994]. The famous book by Hall et al. [1978] about the relation between mugging in the UK in the 1970s and political hegemony is identified by Good and Ben Yehuda as an example of moral panic orchestrated by elites. In this schematic approach it looks as if Hall et al. became an example of what they themselves were explicitly rejecting: moral panic is something like a deliberately organised conspiracy of the ruling class [Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; cf., e.g., Hall et al. 1978: 60]. Such an image, which is more a caricature of Hall et al. than anything else, cannot be inspiring. Yet this caricature does not exhaust the possibilities of the concept of hegemony.

Fitzgerald and Smoczynski reject for their case not only the idea that this moral panic is raised by elites, but also the theory that locates the roots of moral panics in the activities of professionals and NGOs, in the middle class. Instead, they provide enough arguments that this moral panic originated 'from below'. The sensitive connection of the moral panic about Polish migrants arising from below to the hegemonic ideology of prudentialism can also be read as an appeal to use an approach different from the scheme offered by Goode and Ben Yehuda.

Perhaps we should not understand hegemony as a form of rule over somebody, but rather as an ideological constellation. This would make it possible to leave aside the rather scholastic question of whether moral panic originates at the top, in the middle, or at the bottom of society. A more pragmatic hypothesis may be useful: in times of moral panic 'elites', 'the media', 'professionals' and 'activists', and a 'broad section of society' all respond to what they consider to be the 'pressure of reality' and thus co-create reality by considering it in hegemonic frameworks.

The authors are trying to describe the rationality of moral panic through the optic of prudentialism. Sometimes it looks as if the authors themselves adopt this logic. They also very much emphasise both the perspective 'from below' and very general structural causes. Such an approach on the one hand rationalises panic and on the other hand depoliticises it. In my opinion, another step is necessary: to consider moral panic politically, as both a product and a source of political agency.

It is perfectly rational, in the framework of the logic of prudentialism, that a part of the British public perceives Polish workers as a danger. But this logic is not natural, it is the outcome of a hegemony enforced by political and cultural power, and at the same time this hegemony provides political opportunities to other actors. The panic is heard from 'below', but the article gives good evidence that this 'below' is penetrated by a hegemonic logic received 'from above'.

The concept of hegemony makes it possible to acknowledge the existence of rational elements in moral panics and at the same time stand outside this rationality, denaturalise it and show its presuppositions as the outcome of political struggles and the basis for other political conflicts. Moreover, it allows the researcher to move from the description of panic to understanding it as a political opportunity and to analysing what political forces may exploit this situation to formulate their own hegemonic or counter-hegemonic projects. It can contribute to the analysis of our contemporary development: from a position of neoliberal prudentialism combined with liberal values, to a position where political forces form in reaction to the 'pressure of reality' and offer political action (some kind of collective, political 'insurance' against the 'folk devils' in the risk society) that, at least to some extent, lies outside the framework of liberal values—be it in the form of the 'zero tolerance' policy in the Czech Republic or the UKIP campaign in Great Britain.

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