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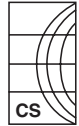


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## Abstract

This article assesses the relationship between terrorism and moral panics to expand understandings of the latter's eruption and orchestration. Answering calls for deeper considerations of folk devils' agentic properties, it interrogates how terrorist methods – the deployment of shocking and exceptional violence to incite fear and stimulate political change – challenge extant understandings of the moral panic framework. Specifically, it argues, in the case of terrorism, that the exaggerated threats and disproportionate responses that define moral panics are not driven solely by moral entrepreneurs or social control agents, but are informed by the strategic practices and rationalities of folk devils themselves. Through its approach, this research enhances social-scientific treatments of terrorism, broadens the scope of moral panic analysis, and extends understandings of how fear and anxiety are manipulated for political purposes.

## Keywords

Fear, folk devils, moral panics, political violence, social problems construction, social reaction, terrorism

## Introduction

Over four decades old, the moral panic framework has displayed enormous import for scholarship concerning the construction and amplification of social problems. For its early proponents (Cohen, 2002; Hall et al., 1978) the term was meant to capture episodes – initiated by moral crusaders, perpetuated by media sensationalism, and reproduced through state practice – involving hysterical reactions and hyperbolic fear towards 'folk

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devils' conceived as threatening social order and communal values. While its significance endures, to preserve its analytic purchase, the concept has been re-evaluated in light of shifting cultural, institutional, and structural arrangements (Garland, 2008; Hier, 2011; McRobbie and Thornton, 1995).

This research contributes to such efforts by interrogating the critical case of terrorism. While hardly new, 9/11 and other spectacular attacks have catapulted terrorism to the forefront of public consciousness, producing an extreme moral panic defined by exaggerated threats, moralistic discourse, and disproportionate responses. Despite its relevance, analyses of terrorism's implications for moral panic theory remain tentative and impressionistic. When assessing the terrorism–moral panic nexus scholars have done so in conventional terms, specifying how societal reactions constitute moral panics (Kappeler and Kappeler, 2004; Morgan and Poynting, 2012; Rothe and Muzzatti, 2004; Shafir and Schairer, 2013; Welch, 2006). While insightful, without considering the strategic and tactical repertoire of dissident organizations, extant analysis occludes a full appreciation of terrorists' distinctiveness as folk devils and their consequences for broader debates surrounding the moral panic paradigm. If terrorism were of marginal importance, such neglect would be inconsequential. However, as detailed below, terrorism and the reactions it engenders display far-reaching consequences for, among others, state sovereignty, democratic arrangements, and perceptions of risk and insecurity.

By interrogating an exceptional or 'deviant' case that unsettles the moral panic paradigm's core tenets and assumptions, this article expands the field of analysis and assists in developing more flexible frameworks that can accommodate the concept's vicissitudes and diverse manifestations. Specifically, in existing studies moral entrepreneurs, media outlets, and social control agents exogenously orchestrate moral panics, while folk devils represent innocent or passive victims. For terrorism, however, panic is endogenously cultivated by folk devils themselves. As an asymmetrical 'weapon of the weak', terrorism has been embraced by dissidents to produce conditions resembling moral panic, and, thereby, compensate for their military inferiority and punch well above their weight. Put differently, those constituting the source of alarm are actively invested in inflating their threatening status and inducing hysteria. This article aims to demonstrate how this admittedly extreme case can deepen understandings of moral panics and the actors, processes, and forces structuring their emergence. Additionally, in assessing terrorism's relationship with moral panics' defining properties (disproportionality, hostility, volatility, etc.) it enlivens ongoing debates regarding tensions and shortcomings associated with the concept.

After defining its terms of reference – moral panics and terrorism – and interrogating their complex relationship, this article's remaining sections detail how terrorists' actions are calibrated to facilitate moral panics and thereby stimulate political change. Specifically, they highlight terrorists' use of violence that: is affective, psychologically traumatic, and socially disruptive; attracts extensive media coverage and sensationalism; and provokes disproportionate overreaction. While largely informed by the War on Terror (WOT), to sufficiently elaborate the terrorism–moral panic nexus and avoid the presentism of scholarship on both topics, empirical examples are drawn from the four 'waves' of modern terrorism (Rapoport, 2002): anarchist (1880s–1920s), anti-colonial (1920s–1960s), new left (1960s–1990s), and religious (1979–present).

Before proceeding three caveats are in order. First, characterizing reactions to terrorism as moral panic is not to dismiss the issue as inconsequential. Terrorism represents a real, albeit often embellished, threat responsible for genuine fear and victimization. Second, this research's scope is selective. Given its interest in how terrorists engage moral panics' core dimensions to compensate for their limited size and resources, its analysis is limited to dissident groups. This does not imply 'terrorism from above' is insignificant, as state terrorism has been far more injurious. Instead, given differences in scale, resources, and opponents, both actors demand distinct analytic treatment (Goodwin, 2006). Finally, given the extensive literatures on terrorism and moral panics, this article's findings and propositions require more rigorous scrutiny than can be provided here. Accordingly, its spirit is exploratory, oriented towards exposing ambiguities, and provoking as much as convincing. Nonetheless, by emphasizing folk devils as powerful agents in producing societal alarm it advances conversations regarding the relation between and forces and processes underlying terrorism and moral panics. Ultimately, such an approach promises to enhance social-scientific treatments of terrorism, broaden the scope of moral panic analysis, and illuminate the complex and contentious politics of risk, fear, and insecurity within late-modern societies.

## Moral panic

Moral panics refer to punctuated moments of alarm in which, more than sources of risk or harm, specific events and behaviors are perceived as threatening society's normative foundations. Introduced in Cohen's (2002) seminal study of 'Mods and Rockers' in 1960s Britain, the concept has since been extended to multifarious issues, whether street crime, pornography, undocumented migration, pedophilia, drug use, or welfare fraud. Essential to moral panics are 'folk devils': those deemed responsible for the behavior in question. As targets of enmity and enhanced social control folk devils are constructed as evil personified, 'visible reminders of what we should not be' and the antithesis of stability, order, and security (Cohen, 2002: 2; cf. Hier, 2002). Folk devils are not randomly selected and are typically constructed in moralistic and overbroad terms, with marginalized groups and 'cultural scapegoats' being especially susceptible, even when the vast majority of members are law-abiding (Garland, 2008: 15). Moreover, although characterized as threatening social and moral order, reactions to folk devils are 'out of all proportion to the actual threat' (Hall et al., 1978: 16). While risk perception and evaluation are often far from objective and beset by 'dispute and collective negotiation' (Garland, 2008: 13; cf. Douglas, 2002; Watney, 1987), for Cohen (2002: xviii) 'there are ... many panics where ... judgment[s] of proportionality' – whether in relation to public atavism, available empirical evidence, or comparisons with equivalent or more serious concerns – 'can and should be made – even when the object of evaluation is vocabulary and rhetorical style alone'.

To differentiate moral panics from legitimate societal concern, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2010) have enumerated five essential attributes: (1) concern (the issue is fearsome and anxiety-inducing); (2) hostility (those deemed responsible are subjected to intolerance and revulsion); (3) consensus (anxiety is widespread); (4) disproportionality (the issue provokes overreaction); and (5) volatility (panic emerges and dissipates with stunning alacrity).

Far from spontaneous, moral panics stem from the interlocking reactions of social control agents, the media, and publics. In conventional accounts they encompass three developmental pathways: grassroots, interest group, and elite-engineered (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2010). In the first moral panics are organic and initiated by perceptions and sentiments broadly diffused among the lay public, and eventually incorporated into media coverage and political discourse. In the second, alarm stems from the deliberate actions of moral entrepreneurs who work to direct attention towards a particular moral 'evil'. The final model represents a coordinated propaganda campaign designed to orchestrate hegemony and divert attention from and avoid solutions to deeper structural problems that threaten elite interests.

Whether they percolate up from genuine public concern or are manufactured by state experts and moral entrepreneurs, the media represent 'the prime movers and ... beneficiaries' of moral panics (Garland, 2008: 12; cf. Altheide, 2009). Since the vast majority of those swept up in the collective alarm do not directly experience the issue in question, media outlets act as informational gatekeepers that 'visualize deviance, concentrate and publicize outrage ... offer perspectives on social control' and bring folk devils into existence (Cohen, 2002: 89; cf. Altheide and Michalowski, 1999). Accordingly, they play an agenda-setting role in constructing reality and determining what is 'socially thinkable' (Altheide, 2002; Welch et al., 1998).

Such dynamics are significant since moral panics not only identify threatening groups and behaviors, but, through the process of 'deviancy amplification', actively create and intensify the problem (Cohen, 2002). Here, society labels a group deviant, then isolates and stigmatizes its members. The resulting alienation begets increased deviance and more intense media alarmism, political handwringing, and public indignation, thereby producing powerful and ongoing feedback loops. As fear and condemnation become widespread, hardline policies and a control culture are institutionalized, creating further polarization, intensifying real and perceived deviance, and confirming popular stereotypes (Jewkes, 2010).

Despite their continued importance, several scholars have re-evaluated moral panics given changes in late-modern societies. One issue distinctly relevant for this research concerns folk devils' under-theorization 'as social actors' (DeYoung, 2011: 120) with 'structural origins, values and interests' (Meades, 2011: 145). According to such accounts, orthodox appraisals privilege the actions of publics, the mass media, moral crusaders, and social control agents, while treating the targets of hysteria and indignation as 'hapless victims' (DeYoung, 2013: 142) and denying the complex web of social relations underpinning moral panics. For McRobbie and Thornton (1995) technological advances facilitating the diversification of media production, and the proliferation of advocacy-based civil society organizations have ensured folk devils and their advocates are increasingly empowered to mobilize resources, exercise agency, and contest the former's vilification. Alongside underscoring the fractious nature of social and moral regulation (Ungar, 2001), such outcomes suggest folk devils may independently affect the dynamics and consequences of societal reaction.

Despite its significance, the issue of agency has yet to be fully plumbed. For existing works emphasis has been placed on folk devils' capacity to contest unjust treatment, defuse moral panics, and 'fight back' (McRobbie, 1994). However, as this work

demonstrates, in certain instances, folk devils, whether for political or other reasons, may seek to actively catalyze and intensify the very conditions underpinning moral panics' gestation and eruption.

## Terrorism

As an 'essentially contested' concept, terrorism is elusive and difficult to analytically delimit.<sup>1</sup> Alongside its complexity and overlap with other forms of political violence (warfare, insurgencies, etc.), terrorism's indeterminacy stems from its situational and pejorative nature, qualities captured in the oft-quoted statement 'one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter'. Reflecting such dynamics, political articulations of terrorism are often employed by governments to arouse public sentiment, demonize adversaries, exonerate their own acts of terror, and accumulate power and legitimacy (Goodwin, 2006).

While a full elaboration exceeds its ambit, following others (Hoffman, 2006; Schmid and Jongman, 1988; Tilly, 2004; Wilkinson, 2011), this work defines terrorism as the deployment of extra-normal violence against random or symbolic targets for the purposes of: (1) inducing fear and anxiety; (2) affecting audiences beyond the immediate victims; and (3) stimulating political change by influencing the decision-making and behavior of governments, societies, and communal groups. Through horrific unexpected acts that transgress conventions concerning the legitimate exercise of violence, terrorism aims to inflict extreme psychic trauma, and activate anxieties concerning safety and security. Additionally, it represents an expressive vehicle of communication. As attention-seeking violence, terrorism's immediate targets constitute 'message generators' (Schmid and Jongman, 1988) for victimizing broader audiences. Accordingly, terrorism represents a form of signaling in which violence is intended to communicate the target's vulnerability, the existence of perpetrators, and their capacity to strike again (Tilly, 2004). Finally, terrorism is oriented towards inciting particular responses and interactional dynamics that will significantly transform the existing sociopolitical order. Alongside capitulation, violence is often orchestrated to provoke overreaction and repressive reprisals. Since the 19th century several organizations have employed terrorism to initiate a *dance macabre* of terror against terror, with the goal of unmasking the targeted regime's malevolent qualities and galvanizing support for their cause (Parker, 2007).

Together these properties unite a variegated ensemble of actors possessing distinct motives, capacities, and strategic and ideological orientations. Ultimately, their embrace of fear and violence as mechanisms of political and historical change renders terrorists an exceptional class of criminals and deviants (Hoffman, 2006). Unlike conventional folk devils associated with youth hooliganism and social and sexual deviance, terrorists belong to formalized networks displaying collective behavior, intentionality, and explicit political goals and aspirations. This final property also distinguishes terrorists from organized criminal networks, which, while also embracing the utility of violence, are non-ideological and driven by instrumental goals of profit-seeking. Only terrorists exist as 'violent intellectual[s]' that wield violence in the service of coherent causes and belief systems (Hoffman, 2006: 38).

Terrorists' distinctiveness is also witnessed in the type of threat they pose, an issue distinctly salient as globalization and 'space-shrinking' technologies have facilitated paradigmatic changes in terrorism's scale, organizational structure, and potential impact. On the one hand, rapid transport and information and communication technologies have enhanced terrorists' logistical capacity, expanding physical access to targets and making it easier to dispense destruction and impact audiences on a planetary scale (Black, 2004; Juergensmeyer, 2000). Moreover, such dynamics have assisted in creating an 'unpredictable topography' of phantom cell networks whose spectral maneuvers and concealment deep within society render terrorism impossible to definitively survey and guard against (Mythen and Walklate, 2006: 387). Finally, technological modernization has intensified terrorism's possible impact. Given potential access to biological agents, radioactive 'dirty bombs', and other high-tech weapons, security experts have highlighted the possibility of mass-casualty attacks, labeling terrorism a vital threat to global security (Laqueur, 2000).

Given these features, terrorism typifies broader shifts in contemporary sources of social anxiety and occupies a medial space between conventional moral panics and the 'potential political catastrophes of a risk society' (Ungar, 2001: 271). At present, experiences of risk are defined by faceless, shadowy parties and stem from hazards (GMOs, nuclear accidents, climate change, etc.) that are extra-territorial, techno-scientific, future-oriented and cannot be easily calculated or insured against (Beck, 1992; cf. Mythen and Walklate, 2006). Terrorism's transnational reach, cataclysmic potential, and unpredictable and unknowable qualities reflect and entrench this 'wider culture of insecurity, fear, and victimization' (Cohen, 2002: 16), making the issue a source of social anxiety that 'do[es] not quite fit the moral panic paradigm' (Ungar, 2001: 272). Nonetheless, while terrorism resonates with the inchoate fears of 'risk society', it remains a distinctive hazard as danger is understood in moral as much as technical terms.

## Terrorism as moral panic

Utilizing Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (2010) taxonomy, this section outlines the relationship between official and popular reactions to terrorism and the central tendencies of Cohen's model. As it indicates, while leading scholars agree that contemporary responses clearly embody moral panics (Altheide, 2006; Garland, 2008; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2010; Hunt, 2011), as a deviant case, terrorism accentuates important tensions and debates concerning the framework, whether, *inter alia*, those associated with gauging concern, disproportionality, or volatility.

### *Consensus and concern*

Public concern and consensus regarding terrorism have often reached seismic proportions following an attack. Underpinned by its violent and unanticipated nature, and further stoked by the volume and intensity of media and political discourse, terrorism produces a 'culture of fear' (Furedi, 2006), dynamics witnessed in public opinion surveys, newscasts, official alerts, security checkpoints, warning posters, armed guards, concrete barriers, and other signs of a siege mentality (Savitch, 2014). Further, direct

behavioral evidence, whether increased expenditures on personal safety, refusals to fly or travel internationally, or spikes in hate crimes and vigilantism directed towards those of Muslim or Middle Eastern background, provides more immediate proof of heightened anxiety (Mueller, 2006; Welch, 2006).<sup>2</sup> Such dynamics are also evidenced in rituals of solidarity and security. Like other external threats, terrorism may produce significant, albeit fleeting, displays of patriotism, unity, and loyalty. Faced with a threatening enemy: 'people draw together; symbols are rallied around; leaders exalted; control becomes more centralized' (Collins, 2004: 53).

### *Hostility*

Terrorism also produces intense enmity towards its perceived perpetrators. Approached as fanatical, nihilistic, and 'ultra-deviant', terrorism's practitioners are constructed as inhuman and beyond reason and civilization, dynamics frequently displaying collateral consequences for entire national, religious, and racial groups with no connection to political violence (Mythen and Walklate, 2006; Welch, 2006). Typifying such dynamics, around the start of the 20th century Anarchists and political radicals in Europe and North America were characterized as 'wild animals', 'lunatics', and a 'growing bacillus menacing the ... body politic' (Miller, 2013: 124). Additionally, the military dictatorship in 1970s Argentina framed small bands of revolutionary terrorists as threats to Christendom and Western Civilization, claims legitimating massive acts of state terror against almost anyone expressing sympathy for leftist ideologies (Oplinger et al., 2013). Finally, in the early 1980s, American judge Arthur Goldberg characterized terrorism as a 'clear and present threat to [civilization's] very existence' (Townshend, 2011: 33).

Amid the WOT, virulent rhetoric has been ratcheted up considerably. Political elites have not only channeled, but actively cultivated public resentment through hardened distinctions between friend/enemy and good/evil, dynamics positing an in-group of respectable citizens and an out-group of threatening others. Characterized as a 'new kind of evil' (Hoffman, 2006: 30), President Bush claimed Al-Qaeda endangered collective morality and the very order of American society, seeking 'not merely to end lives but to disrupt and end a way of life' (Jackson, 2005: 194). Terrorism's moralization was also witnessed in official explanations. The 9/11 attacks were depicted as an assault on America's exceptional moral and political qualities, whether its democratic, open, or pluralistic character.<sup>3</sup> This depoliticized framing reduced the attacks to the evil deeds of deranged, pathological individuals, denying the possibility that American militarism and aggression within the Islamic world might have contributed to the violent acts the country was attempting to liquidate. Like other elite-engineered moral panics, such rhetorical moves functioned to unite citizens in collective opprobrium, reaffirm their morality and identity, and divert attention from more pressing and intractable issues.

### *Disproportionality*

As the primary indicator of moral panics' emergence disproportionality also represents a 'central problematic of the moral panic literature' (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2010: 29). Several critics have argued it is often impossible to definitively prove the revealed



extent of a problem is incommensurate with societal reactions (Ungar, 2001; [Waddington, 1986](#)), dynamics uniquely applicable to 'future-oriented', unquantifiable, and potentially catastrophic threats like terrorism. While risk assessments and forecasts indicate societal reactions are disproportionate (Mueller, 2006), they neglect that, more than sources of harm, terrorist acts augur deeper, more prevalent threats. While many folk devils are conjured solely through media and political campaigns, terrorists actively cultivate uncertainty and manufacture a deferred future haunted by the quotidian possibility of violence. Nonetheless, while terrorism produces a frightening and unpredictable landscape, the available evidence suggests official and popular reactions are unwarranted when compared to more harmful issues. For example, between 1969 and 2013 5755 Americans, domestically and internationally, died in terrorist attacks, a figure dwarfed by deaths from domestic gun violence in 2013 alone (33,636 [CDC, 2014]). Given this information, surely terrorism's characterization as a civilizational threat and expenditures in excess of US\$1 trillion on homeland security are disproportionate and exaggerated.

In terms of specific manifestations, official responses to terrorism frequently entail punitive rhetoric and policies that provoke irrational fear. To be clear, state responses are not preordained and remain contingent upon, among others, regime type, public sentiment, the severity of the perceived threat, and elite interests. Although many governments have adopted hardline orientations, others have responded with measured assessments and reactions.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the historical record reveals government reactions frequently represent 'extreme example[s] of ... disproportion[ality]' (Hunt, 2011: 59).

Severe responses to terrorism are often informed by precautionary logics, pre-emptive measures, and the exploitation of anxiety regarding future devastation. Through allusions to shadowy threats and worst-case scenarios state managers have frequently manipulated genuine public concern for political purposes, whether boosting legitimacy, achieving consent, or advancing initiatives (military interventions, immigration restriction, political repression, heightened surveillance and policing, etc.) previously lacking the requisite support ([Altheide, 2006](#); [Walsh, 2015](#)). Around the turn of the 20th century governments throughout Europe and North America exaggerated the menace of Anarchist violence, advancing claims of a global network and conspiracy in which Anarchists were secretly 'lurking all over the continent' (Miller, 2013: 114). Alongside promoting labor repression, for several countries, such assertions galvanized support for mass round-ups and deportations of foreign radicals associated with ethnic and religious minorities. At present, 'the ... impossibility of estimating the terrorist risk has enabled political elites to circulate decidedly fanciful claims' regarding the threat of radical Islam ([Mythen and Walklate, 2006](#): 387). In justifying the WOT's politico-legal architecture, Vice President Cheney emphasized terrorism's unknown and potentially cataclysmic nature, noting 'If we make the wrong choice, the danger is that we will get hit again ... in a way that is devastating' (Altheide, 2006: 415). President Bush echoed such sentiments, claiming, 'We cannot wait for the final proof ... in the form of a mushroom cloud' (Welch, 2006: 23).

In terms of institutional responses, terrorism, like other moral panics, typically inspires escalations of social control and discipline, whether police repression, the

abrogation of human rights, techniques of social defense, or the bending, suspension, and circumvention of the law (Cohen, 2002: 66–72, 140–145). Such measures are often exceedingly elastic and based on group-based profiles where shared social characteristics (nationality, phenotype, religion, etc.) incite suspicions of malevolence and criminality. While visible in several cases, whether the Red Scare or the Battle of Algiers (Crenshaw, 1972; Miller, 2013), these dynamics are especially conspicuous at present. With its appeals to ‘infinite justice’ and global conflict without clear adversaries and parameters, the WOT has provided an alibi for creating a fluctuating net of enforcement that can be ‘cast over *any* form of resistance to sovereign power’ whether activists, domestic minorities, foreigners, or other suspect populations (Gregory, 2003: 319). Such trends are uniquely applicable to the contemporary climate of Islamophobia. Specifically, terrorism’s interpretation through registers of racial and religious difference has incited ‘signification spirals’ (Hall et al., 1978) in which fears and threats stemming from small-scale subversive and antagonistic groups (jihadists) result in the construction of entire collectivities (Muslims in general) as folk devils that are inherently risky, dangerous, and other.

### *Volatility*

Traditionally conceived as ‘eruptive ... and quick to subside’ (Hunt, 2011: 57), it is increasingly acknowledged that moral panics vary in ‘intensity, duration, and impact’ (Garland, 2008: 13). While many are transient and ephemeral, others, whether regarding drugs, street crime, or terrorism, represent persistent sources of unease. When coupled with the rise of a globalizing mass media and 24-hour news cycle these developments have transformed moral panics from brief eruptions into enduring states of anxiety and insecurity (Carrabine, 2008). For terrorism, while the hysteria it produces may abate, it displays long-lasting repercussions, whether a lingering sense of vulnerability that can quickly transmute into full-blown panic or the entrenchment of intensified policing and securitization.

## **Creating crisis and orchestrating alarm: Terrorists’ role in engineering moral panics**

A central task for terrorism scholars is explaining how ‘groups with little or no ... political power ... can achieve effects ... out of all proportion to their numerical or [military] power’ (Wardlaw, 1989: 3). While their weapons are often primitive, their asymmetrical tactics – ‘the use of directed terror ... [and] widespread panic’ – are quite sophisticated (Wardlaw, 1989: 3). Specifically, terrorists believe their efforts will produce an ‘illusionist’s trick’, injecting them with an authority and influence they previously lacked (Fromkin, 1975: 685).

Informed by these issues, this section assesses terrorism’s strategic dimensions and elaborates their role in initiating moral panics. In doing so it identifies a fourth model of emergence – *provocateur* – not captured in the existing typology of grassroots, interest group, and elite-engineered. As detailed below, while societal reactions embody moral panics’ core dimensions, for modern terrorist organizations, such responses are desired,

anticipated, and central to their calculations and designs. Rather than exogenous targets whose threatening status is constructed by publics, states, and moral entrepreneurs, terrorists' strategic logic and practices are endogenous to moral panics' orchestration. Specifically, when carrying out attacks terrorists utilize three tactics that facilitate moral panics: (1) the deployment of affective violence; (2) the exploitation of the mass media; and (3) efforts to incite disproportionate overreaction.

### *Affective violence*

Terrorists represent specialists in affective violence or forms of aggression oriented towards evoking particular moods and emotional states. While warfare is physical and instrumental, terrorism constitutes a symbolic and gruesome form of political dramaturgy (Alexander, 2004). Its first-order objectives are not to kill or destroy but, through scenes of devastation, whether of corpses, mangled transportation, or collapsed buildings, to instill unremitting fear. While the extent of physical destruction is typically miniscule, terrorism's social and psychological effects – irrational panic, collective alarm, and 'intrusive, repetitive recollection' – are often profound and long-lasting (Schmid and Jongman, 1988: 19).

Terrorism's unsettling character stems from its effects on citizens' interior landscapes and sociopolitical order. By producing perceptions of vague, unpredictable, and ubiquitous threats, terrorism is acutely unnerving and evokes visceral feelings of personal danger and vulnerability. Exemplifying these dimensions, the Algerian National Liberation Front's (FLN) official journal, *El Moudjahid*, claimed the organization's campaign of random and intermittent attacks on *ped noirs* sought to deliver an 'incontestable psychological shock' and foster 'panic, insecurity ... and fear in the enemy camp' (Crenshaw, 1972: 386). According to Feraoun, an Algerian novelist and school-teacher, this strategy instilled 'panicky fear without a precise object, without foundation', an imminent, but unspecified, sense of catastrophe (Crenshaw, 1972: 388). Indistinguishable from ordinary citizens (they lack uniforms and insignia), terrorists subvert distinctions between the battlefield and everyday life and exist as 'predatorial unmarked strangers' (Valier, 2002: 321) that render security a chimerical task. Moreover, at present, mundane and seemingly innocent objects (shoes, backpacks, underwear, Stanley knives, the mail, etc.) are appropriated as weaponry and transmogrified into sources of fear, uncertainty, and potentially unspeakable destruction. Consequently, terrorism displays a spectral quality, establishing pervasive unease and conjuring 'imaginariums of eschatological dimensions' (Miller, 2013: 5).

Terrorists also exploit modern societies' defining properties to unsettle political order and sociality. Terrorism transforms the 'open society' from a mark of distinction into a liability. Despite their military prowess, economic power, and political influence, highly complex, differentiated, and densely populated societies are exceedingly difficult to defend against unconventional attacks. Consequently, terrorism shatters myths regarding the state's capacities of security, sovereignty, and order enforcement, thereby reintroducing the very element of disorder – the *bellum omnium contra omnes* – it emerged to domesticate. Further, the anxiety terrorism produces often stems from its targeting of the spaces and infrastructures of daily life, including mass-transit, zones of entertainment

and consumption (shopping districts, hotels, cafes, theaters, etc.), and sites of worship. Beyond denuding social life of its pacific stability, attacking such areas supplants trust and interdependence with suspicion and paranoia. According to Savitch (2014: 53), 'Once people ... interpret normal activities as "a dare", they have converted personal trepidation into a nub of civic distrust.' When everyone appears potentially threatened and threatening, and no one knows what behavior to expect from others, communal bonds and associations collapse into a mass of anxious and atomized individuals (Wardlaw, 1989).

### *Threat amplification*

Alongside its role in moral panics' promulgation, the mass media double as a crucial component of terrorism. Terrorists seek and utilize media coverage to publicize their struggle, maximize their audience, and facilitate deviancy amplification in which media coverage distorts and exacerbates their threatening status. Accordingly, modern terrorism would never have assumed the prominence it has without the media, a situation leading scholars to label it 'mass-mediated violence' (Weimann, 2008; cf. Wardlaw, 1989). According to Carlos Marighella's *Mini-Manual*, a sourcebook for dissidents across the world, 'the war of nerves ... the psychological war' hinged on the effective 'use of the mass-media' (1982: 87–90). Reflecting this statement, groups ranging from the Tamil Tigers to the Red Army Faction (RAF) have devoted entire wings of their organizations to publicity and media relations (Hoffman, 2006).

The terrorism–media relationship is one of reciprocal exploitation and dependence (Tuman, 2009). Terrorists routinely orchestrate attacks that evidence a sophisticated grasp of the nature of mass communications and audience dynamics. Seemingly aware that media representations are not mirrors that objectively reflect 'reality' but, by providing 'images ... much sharper than reality' (Cohen, 2002: 43), enter directly into its constitution, terrorists have often fashioned and staged their violent methods, whether in terms of their symbolism, victimization, or spectacular nature, to meet the media's 'institutionalized "need" for moral panics' (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2010: 90). Given the drama of horrific violence and accompanying 'images of pantomime villains, Hollywood styled attacks, and heart-wrenching victims', terrorism is a media spectacle of the first order and clearly embodies the melodramatic nature of media events identified by Cohen (Vertigans, 2013: 38). As noted by one former member of the German RAF and Italian Red Brigades, 'We give the media what they need: newsworthy events ... [they] are very invested in our actions ... [which are often] planned for the media' (Schmid, 2005: 147). As the quote suggests, while the media are integral to terrorism, terrorism also facilitates the news media's ceaseless efforts to boost ratings amid the 'rigors of intense ... globalized competition' (Reiner, 2013: 149), and shock, captivate, entertain, and otherwise affect the emotions of increasingly voyeuristic audiences (Altheide, 2002).

For terrorists, mass communications drastically expand the size of the 'witnessing public' (Coleman and Ross, 2010). Without media, terrorism's impact would only affect those in the attack's immediate vicinity. Even before the age of electronic media, European Anarchists embraced the press's strategic significance, believing the publicity it generated would 'create a myth of global revolutionary pretensions ... stimulat[ing]

fears and suspicions disproportionate to its actual impact' (Hoffman, 2006: 7). Facilitated by technological advancements (portable cameras and satellite uplinks) terrorist acts increasingly represent globally legible events with mass-psychological effects for spatially dispersed publics. For Black September's hostage-taking and murder at the 1972 Munich Olympics, approximately 800 million individuals witnessed the events on television, leading the group to claim the incident was 'like painting the name of Palestine on a mountain' visible 'from the four corners of the earth' (Hoffman, 2006: 70). For September 11, the attacks – whether their nature, targets, or timing – were designed to maximize media coverage. According to an Al-Qaeda training manual, by targeting 'sentimental landmarks' the organization sought to acquire 'intense publicity' and produce pervasive fear (Nacos, 2003: 4–5).

Terrorists also exploit media outlets' appetite for dramatized coverage and how it distorts perceptions of risk and danger. With the drift towards 'infotainment' the grammar and symbolic representations of media coverage are crafted in ways that offer simplistic narratives and privilege formats that are 'visual, brief, action-oriented, and dramatic' at the expense of in-depth analysis and 'referentially derived information' (Altheide, 2002: 47). As publics are increasingly sensitized to accept stylized and stereotypical accounts as more arresting and factual than dispassionate journalism, sensationalist media narratives not only resonate with, but sharpen, public sentiment (Altheide, 2006). Through editing and the inclusion of high-production sound, music, and graphics, the news media relay scenes of spectacular violence, stunning visual imagery, alarming threats to collective security, and moral conflicts between good and evil. As demonstrated in New York, Madrid, and London, vivid repetitive coverage of attacks and their aftermath reverberated throughout the televisual landscape, priming 'the cognitive and emotional processes that help[ed] create a disproportionate sense ... of vulnerability' (Breckenridge and Zimbardo, 2007: 123). Ultimately, by selecting and organizing content in ways that shape audience assumptions about terrorism, the media promulgate a 'fear narrative' defined by 'the pervasive communication ... awareness, and expectation that danger and risk are ... central feature[s] of the effective environment' (Altheide, 2006: 114).

Moreover, like crime, media depictions of terrorism conform to the 'law of opposites' in which coverage accentuates extreme, shocking incidents at the expense of more routine offenses (Surette, 2014). While terrorist episodes are typically quantitatively small in frequency and injury, the volume and tenor of media coverage makes otherwise obscure organizations appear more menacing, capable, and effective than they actually are, thereby perpetuating myths about 'twenty foot tall' and 'all-knowing, all-seeing terrorist[s]' (Friedman, 2004: 36; cf. Tuman, 2009). Researchers have demonstrated that, since the 1980s, Americans have routinely identified terrorism as a leading source of concern, eclipsing other social problems that, to the extent they can be objectively ascertained, are far more devastating (Breckenridge and Zimbardo, 2007).<sup>5</sup>

### *Provoking punitiveness*

Beyond generating fear and publicity, terrorism frequently represents a strategy of provocation in which weaker actors turn their opponents' military and coercive superiority

into liabilities (Parker, 2007). Under such arrangements terrorists exploit the symbiotic relationship between folk devils and social control agents in which each responds to, feeds on, and magnifies the other. Here the essential idea is that vengeful unrestrained reprisals will erode the targeted regime's legitimacy, exposing its true colors as a despotic force and sharpening the contradictions of the established order. Accordingly, to create terror and carnage they are incapable of effectuating on their own, terrorists rely on an inherent hazard of counter-terrorism: mimesis and imitation. For Agamben (2001: 45) a security-obsessed state 'is a fragile organism; it can always be provoked by terrorism to become itself terroristic'.

Ultimately, strategies of provocation seek to induce conflict and polarization. Whether operating domestically or transnationally, terrorists stand to benefit as harsh reactions may alienate important constituents, inflame tensions, radicalize moderates, destabilize societies, and diminish democracy, outcomes which embolden terrorists and exacerbate the root causes of political violence (Juergensmeyer, 2000). By increasing the resonance of terrorists' claims regarding their struggle and adversary, overwrought responses provide 'propaganda capital' (Wardlaw, 1989: 70) allowing them to mobilize valuable resources, whether ideological support, additional recruits, or weapons and financial assets. Accordingly, through repressive responses 'states "socially construct" more resilient ... terrorist organizations' and, as such, may become 'their own worst enemies' (Parker, 2007: 155–156).

As a strategy, provocation is rooted in 19th-century Anarchism. Drawing on the notion of 'propaganda by deed' several figures, whether Most, Kropotkin, or Nechayev, embraced agitational violence as a necessary catalyst to seize the masses' attention and impel the state's organs of coercion into indiscriminate brutality. According to the Russian Anarchist Kropotkin, terrorist acts were designed to generate 'savage repressions' that would succeed in uniting the masses, 'awaken[ing] the spirit of revolt', and 'driving the rebels to heroism' – a strategy which has since been embraced by numerous thinkers and organizations, including Carlos Marighella, Regis Debray, the FLN, the Tupamaros, and Al-Qaeda (Townshend, 2011: 57).

Gripped by shock, vulnerability, and outrage, rather than carefully calibrated responses in proportion to the injury sustained, there is an intense desire among victimized groups to pursue retributive and cathartic responses. Following 9/11, a *New York Times* poll uncovered widespread support for military action against terrorists even if 'many thousands of innocent people' were killed (Breckenridge and Zimbardo, 2007).<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, all-consuming demands for social defense exonerate drastic expansions in state sovereignty and a turn to 'gloves-off crime control' (Hudson, 2003: 45). Historically, manifestations of counter-terrorism, whether expansions in policing power, preventive – and often indefinite – detention, secret trials, warrantless searches, intrusive surveillance, torture and 'enhanced interrogation', assassinations, or aggressive military strikes and pre-emptive wars, embody forms of 'counter-law' (Ericson, 2008); governmental practices that operate with impunity and are institutionalized in the absence of political deliberation, legal oversight, and public consent.

While state repression may facilitate their liquidation, history is replete with examples of provocation advancing terrorists' proximate and long-term objectives. For nationalist and anti-colonial groups, the spiral of violence produced by terrorist attacks has often

succeeded in estranging and alienating colonial subjects from the metropole. In 1940s Palestine, Britain's response to the Irgun, whether curfews, checkpoints and partitions, executions, or martial law, created 'an image of the army and police as oppressors rather than protectors', dynamics contributing, in part, to Israel's eventual independence (Hoffman, 2006: 52). For Algeria, provocative violence was central to the FLN's strategy and eventual victory. France's response, which included torture, public assassinations, and mass round-ups and forced relocation, backfired catastrophically, transforming FLN members into martyrs, galvanizing opposition among native Algerians, and outraging public opinion in France (Fromkin, 1975). Moreover, in both contexts, government responses established sympathy beyond each organization's theater of operation, transforming local struggles into global issues commanding the international community's attention (Rapoport, 2002).

In Europe, IRA attacks against Britain's security forces in the early 20th century were conducted, in part, to elicit violent and politically useful reactions (English, 2003). Their response came in the form of the Black and Tans, special constables whose indiscriminate attacks 'did more than anything ... to undermine the British effort to keep Ireland within the UK' (Townshend, 2011: 125). More recently, the IRA and ETA coordinated attacks on police, military, and security forces in the hopes of provoking excessive repression (Zirakzadah, 2002). For the former, the Thatcher government's policies of internment and coercive interrogation failed to effect its operational capacity, while reinforcing Republicans' legitimacy and producing a flood of recruits, money, and weapons (White, 1989). Similar strategies were visible for revolutionary groups, like the RAF, whose campaign of kidnappings and bombings sought to enrage the state and 'make fascism visible' in West Germany (Vertigans, 2013).

Finally, provocation represents a central strategy of radical Islamist groups. Although the precise objectives of organizations like Al-Qaeda remain opaque, the available evidence suggests their actions represent a calculated effort to elicit extreme responses, thereby facilitating their broader goals of mobilizing, uniting, and radicalizing the world's Muslim population (Nacos, 2003). In orchestrating their attacks Al-Qaeda seems to have appreciated that, given its hawkish militarism and aggressive unilateralism, the Bush administration was susceptible to provocation.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, the organization hoped American reprisals could be framed as an anti-Islamic crusade and cosmic war between good and evil, believers and infidels.

While Al-Qaeda's objectives remain unfulfilled, America's response has proven counter-productive. Alongside torture, prisoner abuse, and drone strikes, Operation Iraqi Freedom in particular 'breathed new life into the organization', vindicating its claims of Western imperialism and inspiring a sustained insurgency (Byman and Pollack, 2008: 56). Producing approximately 500,000 civilian casualties and 2 million refugees, the war served as a major recruitment tool and source of radicalization in the Middle East, Western Europe, and elsewhere (Welch, 2006). Moreover, America's actions eroded international support, particularly in the Muslim world, while support for Al-Qaeda, indicated through funding and recruitment levels, rose considerably.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, 'far from shrinking, the spaces of lawlessness, the training grounds for global terrorism, expanded to unheard of dimensions' (Bauman, 2013: 102). Further, domestic reactions, whether enhanced surveillance, racial profiling, or revanchist nationalism evidenced in

Islamophobia, racism, and hate crimes, have bred mistrust, discrimination, and harassment, thereby facilitating the radicalization of pockets of domestic minorities, and validating claims regarding Western opposition to Islam.<sup>9</sup> Although it remains unclear if such outcomes are intended or desired, their effects – treating entire populations as threats and folk devils – have amplified and entrenched the very tensions and divisions on which terrorists depend and feed (Morgan and Poynting, 2012).

## Conclusion

In an effort to contribute to debates concerning the construction and amplification of social problems this article has documented terrorists' role in producing moral panics. The preceding indicates that, for many dissident groups, terrorist acts present invaluable tools for accumulating 'power made possible by fear' (Savitch, 2014: 50). While rarely discussed as such, terrorism aims to produce and benefit from the very conditions – elevated anxiety, intense indignation, and punitive overreaction – that define moral panics. By deploying violence that is horrific, unanticipated, and directed towards quotidian spaces and infrastructures, terrorists seek to invoke affective states of extreme fear and intense psychic and social disruption. Moreover, in doing so, terrorists exploit the tendencies of the two most important institutions implicated in moral panics' eruption: the media and state institutions of social control. To obtain notoriety and multiply perceptions of vulnerability and imminent danger well beyond their concrete capacities and material impact, terrorists depend on the anticipated publicity afforded by spectacle-hungry media outlets. Additionally, the disproportionate reactions of security-obsessed states represent an important resource for terrorist organizations. By eroding legitimacy and breeding support for their cause, the collateral consequences of indiscriminate and clumsy reprisals are a central means by which terrorists amplify their impact, mobilize resources, and acquire and sustain their strength.

In interrogating these dynamics this research not only clarifies the terrorism–moral panic relationship, but suggests fruitful ways of extending the moral panic paradigm beyond its initial conceptual moorings. As an outlier or deviant case terrorism displays attributes that resonate with, but are not entirely captured by, received definitions. While other sources of social anxiety more closely reflect the expectations of the moral panic paradigm, the case of terrorism, whether in regard to its political underpinnings, association with sweeping collectivities, relationship to the inchoate hazards of risk society, or, most importantly, orientation to actively promulgating hysteria, deviates from established generalizations regarding the character of folk devils and activation of social anxiety. In particular, by highlighting instances in which folk devils are, not external to, but directly and intentionally implicated in inflating public fear, cultivating uncertainty, and triggering exaggerated reactions from state authorities, security experts, and media outlets, terrorism is particularly useful in identifying new facilitating conditions and causal pathways. If, as is argued, terrorism represents a potent source of contemporary fear and alarm, then such findings cannot be easily dismissed. While these features suggest extant modes of analysis are found wanting in their explanatory mettle, this does not imply the moral panic concept should be overhauled or jettisoned, but sharpened and refined to better account for the diverse agents and mechanisms involved in the production and



exploitation of collective alarm. Put differently, by weakening ‘the original proposition’ and suggesting a ‘modified proposition that will be stronger’, critical or deviant case studies like terrorism display ‘great theoretical value’ and can assist in opening new avenues of investigation concerning the shifting sources and consequences of contemporary unease (Lijphart, 1971: 692).

Alongside deepening understandings of the potential actors, practices, and conditions guiding and initiating moral panics’ eruption, this article has implications for the policy alternatives open for the future. The preceding suggests that fearful, retributive, and vengeful reactions to terrorism undermine the very conditions – security and democracy – they are purported to protect and preserve. Whether in relation to intrusive surveillance, preemptive policing, group-based profiling, or unchecked sovereign power, hardline responses attenuate constitutional protections and democracy’s consensual character, creating an environment of suspicion, hostility, and atomization that corrodes communal bonds and solidarity. Second, while they may succeed in disrupting terrorist organizations, efforts to fight terror with terror are equally likely to produce greater opposition, strengthen support for the terrorists’ cause, and foment ongoing spirals of violence. Additionally, indiscriminate responses create conditions – collateral damage, precarity, and social exclusion – that contribute to terrorism’s ‘root causes’. Such outcomes suggest an intrinsic risk of counterterrorism is the inclination towards imitation. Accordingly, when responding to terrorist acts, whether executed by states or dissidents, Nietzsche’s aphorism should be heeded: ‘Whoever fights monsters should see to it that ... he does not become a monster. ... [W]hen you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you’ (Nietzsche, 2010: 89).

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### Notes

1. Underscoring these dynamics Schmid and Jongman (1988) have identified 123 academic and official definitions.
2. While conventional proxies of concern (media coverage, political discourse, public opinion) only offer ‘low resolution’ images, behavioral indicators provide *prima facie* evidence of anxiety (Ungar, 2001: 280).
3. As President Bush stated ‘America was targeted ... because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity’ (Croft, 2006: 72).
4. The latter include conciliatory efforts that address terrorism’s ‘root causes’ whether negotiations, social and political reforms, or peace accords (Maras, 2013).
5. Formal risk assessments reveal Americans are more likely to drown in a bathtub or be struck by lightning than die from terrorism (Mueller, 2006).

6. Additionally, at the WOT's height, over half of the American population supported ethno-racial profiling and subjecting Muslims to intensive scrutiny dynamics also witnessed in Europe (Savitch, 2014: 60; cf. Nussbaum, 2012).
7. According to Bin Laden, Al-Qaeda found it 'easy to provoke this administration' (Kydd and Walter, 2006: 71).
8. In 2000 52% of Turkey's population held favorable views of the US versus 9% in 2007. Similar polls in Indonesia revealed a decline from 75 to 29%. Moreover, by 2007 two-thirds of Jordanians and Palestinians, and 41% of Egyptians perceived Al-Qaeda as a legitimate resistance movement (Von Hippel, 2008: 183).
9. Alongside laws banning the construction of minarets, practice of Sharia law, and wearing of the burqa, niqab, and hijab in several Western countries, such dynamics are evidenced in surges in victimization, whether in the form of physical attacks, harassment, vandalism, or experiences of discrimination concerning employment, air travel, and the use of public space (Nussbaum, 2012; Welch, 2006).

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## Résumé

Cet article examine la relation entre le terrorisme et la panique morale (*moral panic*) afin de mieux saisir les conditions de l'apparition et la construction de cette réaction disproportionnée. Afin de permettre une meilleure compréhension des propriétés agentielles des démons populaires (*folk devils*), ce travail s'interroge sur les conséquences des actes terroristes - qui font appel à des formes extrêmes et choquantes de violence pour semer la peur et inciter au changement - sur notre entendement du cadre de valeurs de la panique morale. Cet article suggère que, dans le cas du terrorisme, la perception exagérée des risques et la réponse disproportionnée qui caractérisent les paniques morales ne sont pas seulement initiées par les chefs moraux (*moral entrepreneurs*) ou par les agents du contrôle social, mais alimentées par les rationalités et les pratiques stratégiques des démons populaires eux-mêmes. En adoptant cette démarche, ce travail vise à améliorer le traitement social et scientifique du terrorisme, à élargir le champ d'analyse de la panique morale et à mieux comprendre l'instrumentalisation politique des peurs et des angoisses.

## Mots-clés

Démons populaires (*folks devils*), terrorisme, violence politique, peur, paniques morales, réaction sociale, construction des problèmes sociaux

## Resumen

En este artículo se analiza la relación entre el terrorismo y pánico moral para ampliar la comprensión de la erupción y la orquestación de este último. Responder a las llamadas de las consideraciones más profundas de propiedades de agente de los demonios folclóricos, se cuestiona cómo los métodos terroristas -el despliegue de la violencia impactante y excepcional para incitar el miedo y estimular el cambio político- desafía el entendimiento existente del marco teórico sobre pánico moral. En concreto, se argumenta que en el caso del terrorismo, las amenazas exageradas y respuestas desproporcionadas que definen el pánico moral no son impulsados únicamente por los emprendedores morales o agentes de control social, pero son informados por las prácticas estratégicas y racionalidades de los propios demonios folclóricos. A través de su enfoque, esta investigación mejora el tratamiento científico-social del terrorismo; amplía el alcance del análisis sobre pánico moral; y se extiende la comprensión de cómo el miedo y la ansiedad son manipulados con fines políticos.

## Palabras clave

Demonios folclóricos, Terrorismo, Violencia Política, Miedo, Pánico Moral, reacción social, construcción de problemas sociales