George Morgan and Scott Poynting (eds.)


With *Global Islamophobia*, George Morgan and Scott Poynting present an edited volume that sheds light on a variety of anti-Muslim tendencies in different national and local settings. It departs from the definition that moral panics ebb and flow but typically leave long-standing institutional changes that continue to negatively affect the marginalised and can be triggered by relatively minor and local incidents that come to stand for something much larger. One of the key features of moral panics is the creation of folk devils: individuals or groups of persons who are identified as deviant types posing a major threat to the moral fabric of a society. They are portrayed in highly stereotypical and negative ways, stripped of any favorable or neutral characteristics, demonised and presented as having nothing at all in common with the ‘moral majority’. Furthermore, the legislative and law enforcers “are expected to detect, apprehend and punish the folk devils” (p. 85) and to secure the code of conduct of the state.

This edited volume consists of an introduction, an index and twelve chapters. Each chapter presents a local case study of a moral panic that developed around the presence of Muslims: in Australia, the United States and six West European countries (Britain, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden). The contributors draw their case studies from different sources such as media, public policy as well as the misuse of anti-terrorism measures by police forces against demonstrators. In all these examples either Islam or (allegedly) Muslim immigrants and their descendants have become a major ‘folk devil’ in a popular demonology and have been framed as threats to ‘Western’ societies, their presumed values, and way of life.

The variety of case studies presented in this volume shows that with the moral panic theory one of the criminology’s most widely known concepts proves being valuable in analysing not only specific media constructions of Muslims as enemies but provides the tools to explain the interplay between media, legislative, executive and their audiences or constituencies in creating Islam as an evil for ‘Western’ societies. There has been some criticism of using psychological terminology to refer to a societal state. However, this volume helps understanding concern, fear and phobia in moral panics not as unpredictable or irrational emotions. With its detailed analyses, it reveals how they are manufactured to serve dominant interest groups.

The construction of a folk devil, stripped of any positive features, is brilliantly demonstrated in Anneke Meyer’s chapter that analyses the portrayal of
Abu Hamza, a former imam of Finsbury Park mosque in London, in 48 articles of the British newspaper the *Sun*. The tabloid characterises Abu Hamza as the archetype of the Muslim terrorist, as a religious leader who exhorts Muslims to hate and even murder non-Muslims in the name of Islam. Meyer thoroughly explains how this message is conveyed, for instance in condensed compound nouns such as ‘hate cleric’ or ‘hate preacher’, which serve as a short hand for a complex discourse and links religion, specifically Islam, to hatred. She follows the process of dehumanisation on the lexical, narrative and thematic level (p. 184). From article to article, she explains, the imam Abu Hamza becomes the ‘hook-handed’ Hamza, a symbol of violence, barbarity, evil and pre-modernity. The significance of this case, as Meyer argues, lies in its contribution to the generation of a larger, more general moral panic about dangerous Islam or Islamic terrorism. This large narrative is based on smaller panics which happened in a close succession, all conveying the common theme of Islam’s lack of fit with Western culture and its consequent danger. Meyer therefore suggests that the Abu Hamza panic is one of the smaller panics which contribute to the creation and escalation of a wider, more substantial and threatening moral panic (p. 185).

The function of such a moral panic is at the focus of Scott A. Bonn’s chapter on the social construction of Iraqi folk devils in the wake of the Second Gulf War. Bonn maintains that the Bush administration initiated an 18-month propaganda campaign to convince US citizens that Iraq was directly involved in the attacks of 9/11. While arguing that this communication strategy “led to popular support for the invasion” of Iraq in 2003 (p. 84), Bonn extensively elaborates the basics of the moral panic theory, with special reference to elite-engineered moral panic. Tales of folk devils serve to either divert public attention away from other problems in society, whose solution might undermine the interest of the elite group or legitimise a specific policy, in this case a war. Hence, an elite-engineered moral panic can play an important role, as Bonn concludes, in enabling the elite to maintain its privileged position.

The chapter with an example from Italy is distinct from the others. Instead of presenting a media analysis of a specific moral panic it sets out to give an overview of Italian thinkers and promoters of Islamophobia. The authors Bruno Cousin and Tommaso Vitale concentrate on the mobilisation of cultural producers behind what they call ‘intellectual Islamophobia’ with highly publicised journalists and writers like Oriana Fallaci and Magdi Allam (the two main intellectual heralds of anti-Islamic mobilisation) and several others who have contributed to legitimise and reinforce an anti-Islamic Zeitgeist. Cousin and Vitale highlight the support for Fallaci and Allam from (Catholic) institutional intellectuals, from the political field as well as scholar