

Media and generational conflict: from ethnography of deviance to cybernetics

Dr. Nello Barile

IULM University

@ Email: nello.barile@iulm.it

Abstract

The media have played a central role not only in defining identities but also in managing the conflicts they trigger. This is particularly evident in the 1960s, when the generational conflict supported by the modernization of society and consumption was clearly delineated, but it persists today in a completely different era. Not only because of the considerable transition from a vertical to a horizontal society, from the centrality of institutions and of the “father” to an inclusive and in its own way problematic democratization. Our era is also crossed by a general feeling defined as retromania (Reynolds, 2011), capable of pervading every area of daily life, communication, consumption and fashion. For this reason it may make sense to “unfreeze” from the past a book that aimed to take stock of the issue of youth subcultures, beyond the brakes and inhibitions of a more institutional sociology. Herein lies the value of a reflection that manages to avoid involvement in the same panic that it studies, such as the excessive enthusiasm of some exponents of Cultural Studies for youth cultures. This study deals with the new youth formations of the Sixties, namely the epic of the Mods and the Rockers, whose epic clash on the English beaches is explained for the first time within a more general framework. Against the banal description of media as “mirrors” or “shapers” (Hodkinson, 2016) of social phenomena, a more complex interpretation suggests that they are circular and adductive means where a specific social identity can be manufactured according to social trends.

Keywords

deviance, moral panic, mass media, labelling theories, cybernetics

Introduction

The popular book entitled *Folk Devils and Moral Panic* was originally published in 1972 by MacGibbon and Kee and republished in 1987 by Blackwell Ltd., and has been reprinted more recently by Routledge (Cohen, 2011/1972). It demonstrates an almost sublimated interest in the phenomena of deviance and control developed by criminology, which Cohen had taught in the

violent South Africa of Apartheid (his country of origin) but which, following his move to the United Kingdom, he was able to reformulate and adapt to the changed context. Therefore, we could define the process that directed the sociologist's research as bottom-up approach: from the first articles on the detailed description of deviance in the English subculture of the Teddy Boys, leading towards a more systematic elaboration thanks to structural-functionalism and catastrophe theory. In this sense, it represents the missing link in sociological reflection on subcultures. However, these are not the only references present in Cohen's study, which incorporates fields of knowledge that are often distant. Of course, the theory of catastrophes, criminal psychology, theories on the media, the analysis of subcultures, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, the relationship between the control of deviance and systemic theories, the analysis of the content of political communication, urban sociology and finally the issues inherent to the imaginary and tourist promotion of cities, or what today is usually defined as city branding. These are all disciplines and areas of interest that the scholar engages with in research project that, chapter after chapter, becomes increasingly complex. Particularly, the theory of moral panic triggered by popular demons, expressions that somehow recall Lombroso's "moral madness", once associated with other more traditional popular demons such as that of the prostitute (Simone, 2017). If in Lombroso's positivism deviance was intrinsic to the deviant subject, here however, the idea of a social construction prevails and develops within the framework of catastrophe theory, expanding to the point of conditioning the functioning of the entire social system.

Never has the term 'framework' been more fitting than in this case to describe a process, given that the author himself admitted to having discovered this theoretical model "towards the end of writing the research on Mods and Rockers" and to have been "immediately struck by the parallels" between "moral panics" and "reactions to natural disasters" (Cohen, 2002/1972, p. xxxiii). Cohen focuses on various occasions on the analogies and differences between natural disasters, which give rise to scenes of objective panic, and those induced by youth deviance, which in fact generate a very specific type of panic, not by chance defined as "moral". The book begins with a historical examination of the events on the English beaches, gradually elaborates this material thanks to the theoretical references cited above and culminates in an in-depth study of the subcultures examined, almost as if he wanted to voluntarily move the focus of the research work to the last chapter. In this introduction I will therefore try to follow the same procedure adopted by the author, but in reverse. I will first focus on the analysis of English subcultures, moving on to an examination of theoretical models, until arriving at our present, in which examples of popular demons and moral panics are now multiplying thanks to a media regime very different from that of our author's time.

Method: Comparing Different Ethnographies

The study of youth groups and cultures is closely linked to the evolution of sociological thought itself and with its ability, especially in the American variant, to satisfy pragmatic directions and needs. For this reason, this line of research originated in the USA, within the activities of the Chicago School, which, particularly with the famous text by W. Footwhite (recently translated into Italian), represented the first analytical contribution to the study of youth gangs. These gangs began to reflect in a problematic way on young age groups, associating them with the problem of urban deviance (Cristante, 1983). This legacy of the Chicago School resonates strongly in the research of Stanley Cohen, who, in a completely different geographical and temporal context, cites works by other scholars from the same School to support his approach. But the complexity of new youth phenomena cannot be addressed using a classic approach to deviance and not only because the United Kingdom of the Sixties is completely different from the USA of the Thirties

The cultural and media context has certainly changed, becoming more complex by the emergence of what sociologists define as new socialization agencies, but above all, the focus of study has changed. A composite youth culture, deeply immersed in the process of modernization,

is heavily influenced by it yet unable to fully align with its demands. This indefinite and elusive object puts the social sciences of the time into crisis, which respond by recovering a method — urban ethnography — that anthropologists had originally developed to study other cultures, weather native or distant from the West (Marcus & Fisher, 1998) and which is now being readapted within the metropolises to study the new strangers: teenagers. These are the same teenagers who, as McLuhan (2002/1964) observed, realized after the launch of Sputnik that Western cities were transforming into stages where they were invited to craft and perform their spectacular identities.

The distance between Stanley Cohen and the tradition of the Birmingham School is not merely nominal but also purely methodological. The differences between the two approaches include not only theoretical references and a deeper interest in stylistic and consumer dimensions but also the methodology — or more specifically, the relationship between the observer (the scholar) and the object of investigation (the subculture). For the authors of the moral panic framework, the object was treated as neutral, emerging from processes of negotiation between the socio-cultural background of young people and the labeling dynamics imposed by institutional systems and the media. In contrast, Cultural Studies exhibit a significant degree of empathy toward youth culture in its various expressions. This bias is explicitly criticized by Cohen, perhaps even beyond his own intentions.

Social scientists are clearly not immune to this sort of involvement with their subject of study. The researcher who, beyond himself, hopes that the phenomenon will take a particular form in order to prove his theories or achieve some more ideological satisfaction, is the most (and only) obvious example of such involvement. I myself cannot claim to have always observed the Mods and Rockers without any such involvement (Cohen, 2002/1972, p. 158).

For Cohen, such involvement does not only concern the sharing of a common background — that is, when the researcher comes from the same context as the object of observation — but in case studies of deviance, it can also be induced by either contrast with or fascination for the social and cultural diversity of the object in question. Thus, “when the object of study is deviance, there is the risk of other types of involvement,” as noted by a researcher quoted in the text, for whom the author states that “many criminologists have an intense (and perhaps indirect) personal interest in the criminal exploitation of their subject. Many are fascinated voyeurs of the criminal world” (Cohen, 2002/1972).

Results

Contrary to Cultural Studies, which would have embraced an excessively empathetic vision of the subculture, at the risk of being sucked into the ethnographic practice of going native, Cohen, while recognizing the dangers of possible fascination, maintains a detached gaze, much like what a certain positivist sociology would call the “objective observer.” Among the scholars who have highlighted this methodological difference, partly siding with Cohen’s approach, Sara Thornton (1996) has most effectively described the issue. If in Hebdige homology is an internal construct of the subculture, produced by its dialectical opposition to the dominant culture (the so-called mainstream), or in another way the final result of applying various bricolages, in Cohen, homology is produced elsewhere and is composed of the selection of a central axiological nucleus and the peripheral values associated with it, according to the object in question. This is because the identity of the subculture is the result of a complementary process of mirroring, in which institutional actors (institutions, media, public opinion, etc.) are decisive, but so are the methods used (inventory, symbolization, labeling, etc.).

As will be seen in the introduction written by the author, the category of moral panics is extended from the specific context of youth subcultures to more current types of popular demons. Cohen cites satanic sects, single mothers and more recently hackers, “freeloader” immigrants or cases of Islamic radicalism. A category that could be further extended to even more current phenomena, from the black bloc to the protagonists of populisms that have emerged throughout Europe. Moreover, the model of moral panic could be particularly useful today for legal and/or

media sociologists to examine the processes of demonization and panic that have produced the phenomenon of new populisms. Cohen partially touches on this issue, especially when in the introduction he criticizes the "Darwinian" individualism that inspired the neoliberal rhetoric from Thatcher to Blair and that made the very "name" of the deviant disappear, legitimizing particularly repressive social policies, perhaps even harsher than those examined in this book. The general framework within which Cohen re-adapts the question of moral panic is the Beck-Bauman's notion of the "risk society" (Cohen, 2002/1972, p. xxx), whose effect of increasing the fears and cognitive instability of the global citizen gives rise to new and more varied typologies of moral panic. A question that also calls into question the differences between digital media and old mass media, together with the possibility of adapting Cohen's model, designed for the old media system, to the nascent world of the web (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995). With the most recent shift to social networks, the same problem arises again but on a larger scale, since these media are a tool for generating and propagating new panics from below and in peer-to-peer mode, whereas the old moral panic was instead managed by the top-down communication infrastructure of traditionalist and mass media.

Discussion. The Object of Investigation: Youth Subcultures

A brief overview of youth subcultures is particularly important to understand various junctures of Cohen's text, especially because, although the book systematically discusses some subcultures, the author only delves into this topic in the final chapter of the work and in the most recent introductions. Furthermore, Cohen almost never uses the concept of subculture. It appears in the introduction and then at the end of the text but only for reasons that are completely marginal compared to the semantic richness of this term. In fact, it is intended to indicate the theoretical matrix (Subcultural Theories) rather than the object itself, or to reinforce the discourse on deviance as in the expression "subcultural drug taking" (Cohen, 2002/1972, p. 231). This notable absence is justified not only by the fact that the original 1972 edition was published in a period in which this concept had not yet fully penetrated the academic debate. Cultural Studies were practically in their infancy and the famous collection of essays edited by S. Hall and T. Jefferson (1976) entitled *Resistance Through Rituals* had not yet been published. However, the work of Phil Cohen (1972) dates back to the same year when he proposes the concept of style, the conceptual linchpin of Dick Hebdige's work, who in fact explored both the general dimensions of subcultural life worlds — such as the two complementary modes of identity construction that he recovers from Levi-Strauss — namely homology and bricolage — and the peculiarities of each subculture. Cohen often uses concepts as synonyms that have taken on very different connotations over the course of the development of cultural studies and marketing studies. Referring to the aesthetic characteristics of "his" Mods, he speaks indiscriminately of lifestyles, consumer styles, fashions, manias, fads, whereas cultural studies have preferred to distinguish these terms and assign a specific meaning to the subcultural dimension: that of the politics of style. But perhaps this is only a recent achievement of Cultural Studies and subsequently of Fashion Studies that at that time would have been difficult to elaborate. Cohen also underlines the centrality of the stylistic dimension, even though he calls it "fashion", so much so that changes in fashion can mean something much deeper and more permanent, assimilating them to historical breaking points such as the phenomenon of the Beatniks in America.

Cultural Studies have explored the fundamental distinction between fashion understood as symbolic and systematic obsolescence imposed by consumer society and style seen as a form of "resistance", autonomous aggregation and conflict against that system. If the concept of subculture refers to the totality of expressive, value and behavioral forms of a given group, the concept of "street style" instead captures the specificity of expressive and dress codes. The concept of style conflicts with that of fashion because it calls into question the process of programmed and symbolic obsolescence of goods, aiming to build a "true" identity that resists time and claims

an antagonistic position against the so-called mainstream. It is possible to reflect in terms of an evolutionary curve of subcultures (and therefore also of their styles) because the history of street styles takes place over the second half of the twentieth century, by virtue of various elements that come into play to alter their nature. Today it is increasingly difficult to identify new types of styles as well as subcultures related to them. This is a difficulty that is as much methodological as phenomenological, which is dictated by the definition of the concept as well as the disappearance of clearly defined styles from the stages of the world's metropolises. Ted Polhemus himself, who mapped the previous manifestations, denounces the difficulties of such an undertaking in the Nineties. Thus the declining part of the subculture curve coincides with a sort of disintegration of the phenomenon as its spread into the territories, once protected, of commercial fashion. The birth of street styles is commonly traced by scholars to the period shortly before the Second World War, when the subculture of Zooties was born in America, an expression of the ambitions of social ascent nourished by the African-American populations living in the metropolises. The fundamental characteristic of this style was indeed the excess of fabric in the preparation of the clothes, which, in a period of economic restrictions, was considered by the dominant culture as an anti-patriotic gesture, but which highlighted the need for integration in the attempt to ascend to a higher social class. The history of street styles has had fertile ground in post-war England where, among other things, the greatest number of youth subcultures were born.

In the mid-1950s, the Teddy Boys, young proletarians who found themselves in a period of economic boom, with greater purchasing power, left their mark on the streets. The 'Edwardian youth' took its name from a high fashion collection known for being inspired by the particular elegance of Edward VII, whose fate was not happy, so much so that in the post-war period, London teenagers were able to buy those clothes at the stalls of charity shops. The Teddy Boys reinterpreted the contents of that collection by inserting elements borrowed from American culture such as jeans or leather ties, thus challenging traditional English culture, which was resistant and worried about the invasion of goods and lifestyles from overseas. Among these, leather ties, jeans and thick-soled wingtip shoes stood out. The jacket with the silk collar became wider and the tie was replaced by the leather lace (boot lace). The black suede shoes with thick rubber soles, the very famous Brothel Creeper (Fiorani 2004), were used because the thick soles guaranteed greater grip on wet surfaces, especially in critical situations such as brawls. The hair was long and sophisticated, in stark contrast to the short cut imposed on young men conscripted for military service. The typical hairstyle included a long and showy quiff called "duck arse", the sideburns were long and very thick. The Teds made their first appearances on the post-war London stage between 1954 and 1956.

The object of analysis of Cohen's book is the clashes between Mods and Rockers on the English beaches in the first half of the Sixties. Two very different subcultures — one that parodically imitates the style of the middle class and the other that is inspired by the rebelliousness of Marlon Brando's *The Wild One* — that only apparently come into conflict over a question of style. According to Sarah Thornton (1996), in fact, at the beginning, the two groups of young people did not identify themselves in opposing factions and coexisted peacefully. Only following the labeling procedures implemented by the media, especially the local press, did they begin to perceive themselves as belonging to two different worlds. The question of authenticity increasingly becomes the pivot around which a certain "subcultural capital" is defined (Thornton, 1996). The generational clash from the Fifties becomes the engine of new lifestyles and therefore of new consumption, and is expressed horizontally in the compensatory clash between subcultures.

The origin of the Mods is reconstructed by Cohen in various phases of transition from the Fifties to the Sixties. Their name is an abbreviation of the word "Modernists," which indicated an intermediate subculture that reacted to the aesthetic exaggerations of the Teddy Boys. These young people appeared on the scene claiming, like the Teds, a foreign-loving matrix that drew on other cultural universes but which flaunted the same attitude of breaking away from official culture. An impeccable style that was apparently integrated into the practices of civil life but which adopted a different metric, accentuating some elements thanks to the use of gadgets or pins

that redefined their image in a deviant perspective. But unlike the Americanism of the Teds, the young Mods adored as objects of worship some typical products of Italian manufacture: clothes, shoes, Lambrettas, or Vespas. The Italian scooter itself soon became the icon of a youth intent on transgressing the consolidated values of English culture in order to influence that popular imagination characterised by a strong chauvinism which branded scooter drivers with the stigma of being "effeminate" (Hebdige, 1988).

A revolutionary vehicle that was designed to ensure mobility for the fairer sex and therefore could not be seen favorably by the moral defenders of tradition and not only, given that as Cohen noted "the owners and manufacturers of scooters often complained about the bad publicity they were getting" (Cohen, 2002/1972, p. 84). The sharpening of the conflict with the other famous subculture of that period — the Rockers — completed the process of labeling by the media and pushed the Mods to evolve into two unpredictable configurations: on the one hand the "hard" Mods who returned to the origins of the working class mimicking the style of the working class hero and therefore transform themselves into Skinheads, on the other the "soft" Mods who assumed a much more sophisticated style and flowed into the psychedelic and flower power movement. The examination of this evolution, which authors such as Dick Hebdige pay tribute to the seminal effort of Stanley Cohen, was indicated through an alternative path by Phil Cohen, whom our author did not have the opportunity to know. As the author noted, "...if you had asked a nineteen-year-old in 1966 if he considered himself a Mod, he would have said that he had been but the Mods were dead", so much so that by 1967 most of the young people in Brighton no longer identified with that style.

The Hippie movement — which derived from some previous subcultures including the Beatniks, the Folkies and the Psychedelics (Polhemus, 1994), and above all from the "soft" wing of the Mod movement (Hebdige, 1979) — developed its own style in coherence with a broader political project, which therefore determined the passage from the subcultural dimension to the more properly countercultural one. Their vision of the world was fundamentally neo-archaic (Morin, 1962), denouncing the dysfunctions of the average lifestyle in Western societies. Hippie clothing hinted at an alternative lifestyle and recovered fabrics and garments imported from Asia, or belonging to other ethnic cultures, to support the utopia of escape from the industrialized West. The Seventies betrayed both the utopian aspirations of the flower power movement and their austere and sloppy look. With Glam, the new youth was concerned with issues closer to their personal experience, deepening the leitmotif of sexual liberation combined with a clear interest in an excessive and spectacular aesthetic.

Every gesture of these young people aimed to question gender differences. The images of radically androgynous pop stars, from Bolan to the New York Dolls, scandalized public opinion, reaching levels that only Punk could later surpass. The remarkable spectacularization of performances and the theatricalization of clothing — which tended to cancel or redefine the human figure — found its exemplary manifestation in Ziggy Stardust, David Bowie's alter ego, who came down from space to become a rock star. Punk marked a point of no return in the epic of subcultures. It was an artistic experience that continues to impress the global collective imagination for its irreverence, which in some cases remains unsurpassed. Journalists identify the year of birth as 1977, when the album *Never Mind the Bollocks* by the Sex Pistols was released, but the genesis of the phenomenon dates back to a few years earlier and is still debated between those who consider it a derivative of American Glam and Garage, and those who claim its British origin. Vivienne Westwood has claimed in several interviews to have invented Punk (cooperating with her partner Malcolm McLaren), or at least to have provided the youth of King's Road with the tools to express their identity. Minimal music, based on linear harmonic progressions composed of a few chords, was consistent with the principle that also governed clothing: no particular technical skills were needed to express one's discomfort, everyone could assert their identity in an absolutely free way. Therefore, even clothing was sparse, irreverent but absolutely plural. Behind the stereotype of the young man with the leather jacket and the crested hair that recurs in the *Greetings from London* postcards, there was a multiplicity of forms, the result of

the juxtaposition of contradictory elements found in charity shops. A multifaceted style, often so essential that it does not contemplate any of the frills that are usually listed in this regard. The documentary importance of *Jubilee* by Derek Jarman lies precisely in having returned an original and in some way authentic image of this style. The subcultures that originate from it, including Dark (in English *Goth*), New Romantic or New Wave will insist as much on the theatrical aspect as on the introspective one.

Hip Hop was also born in the late Seventies, and has demonstrated, over the last few decades, a longevity and continuity unusual for any other street style. With it, the last glimmers of the golden age of spectacular subcultures are consumed and in some way the process of convergence between the brand system and youth cultures is prefigured. At the beginning, Hip Hop was a philosophy strongly suspended between an antagonistic soul — which matured in the ghettos of US metropolises as a response to the discrimination of the dominant culture — and a playful soul, which with the passing of time will become predominant. The set of languages that compose it, from writing to breakdance to turntablism, was made famous by the driving force of rap music.

During the Eighties, a certain balance was achieved between the more militant soul, with a strong political connotation, and the more playful one. The latter, over time, became predominant, so much so that, during the Nineties, it became the distinctive sign of this style. In clothing, the so-called B-Boys made extensive use of tracksuits, sports shoes, caps with visors, chains and jewels, or decontextualized and recontextualized elements in their look such as the stars of Mercedes cars or the alarm clocks around their necks, launched by Flavor Flav, vocalist of Public Enemy: a clear gesture of fetishistic reappropriation of a commodity, a sign of the cultural subordination that had subjugated the “black nation” since the colonial era. In the Nineties, the concepts of subculture and street-style entered into crisis, so much so that Ted Polhemus himself in an interview a few years ago (Barile, 2001) declared that it was no longer possible to continue mapping these phenomena. The crisis of subcultures is mainly due to two concomitant processes: on the one hand, the growing value of communication, which rapidly circulates the signs of the various ‘stylistic islands’, encouraging hybridisation and crossover operations in the two different modalities of style surfing and sampling’n’mixing (Polhemus, 1994); on the other, the growing collusion with the system of global brands (Barile, 2022) which draw fully on this heritage in what Naomi Klein (2000) has defined as a process of “co-optation of youth culture” and which Stanley Cohen had already eminently identified in his examination of the commercialisation of Mod culture.

From Catastrophe Theory to Cybernetics

The key that Cohen offers to scholars of youth subcultures may be the most original, disenchanting and analytically effective approach to overcoming some drawbacks present in other methodologies. Although the theory of moral panic has been superimposed and confused with the interests and research methods of the Birmingham School, there are more points of divergence than similarities between two. If in fact these two orientations share a strong interest in the same object — youth cultures — they diverge both in the methodological approach and in the framework of theoretical references. As I have already mentioned in the previous section, with respect to the theoretical framework, Cultural Studies draw notoriously on a neo-Marxist strand that moves from Gramsci’s concept of hegemony through Althusser’s ISA to a conception of the relationship between language and subjectivity borrowed from Jacques Lacan (Moores, 1990), while Moral Panic is much more inclined to draw on the theoretical framework of institutional sociology mostly influenced by structural-functionalism and symbolic interactionism. Therefore, there is no connivance or complacency in the analysis of the actions of the protagonists of the riots described by Cohen, nor any form of indulgence. The popular demons described in the book are neither agents of a counter-power that resists the framing of society nor outcasts, the final waste of a failed process of socialization. They are the result of mutual monitoring procedures, of young people on other young people, of the media on young people, of society on young people through

the media. Even the procedures of control and sanctioning of deviance are not always obvious and ruthless but demonstrate at every level the presence of the random element, of the error of perception and of stereotyping. Hence the warning of the author who finds himself examining "objects" that are not entirely "alive and real" but as natural events redefined through the gaze of a social reaction that is opposed to them.

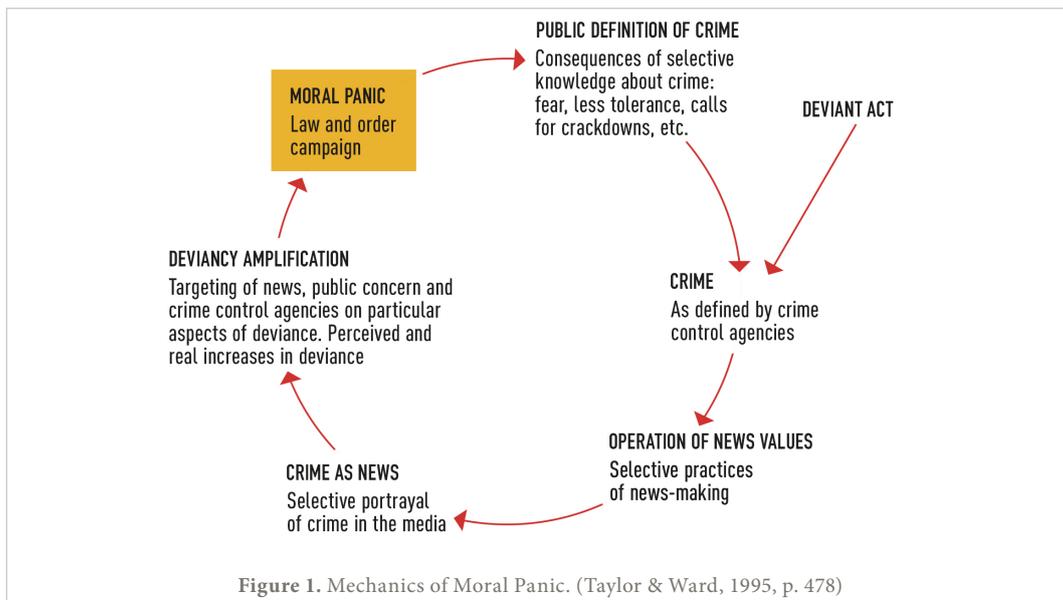
"Organizing the book in this way implies that in the first part the Mods and Rockers will hardly appear as "real, living people" at all. They will be looked at through the eyes of the social reaction and in this way they will appear as incorporeal objects, Rorschach stains on which the same reactions are projected" (Cohen, 2002/1972, p. 20).

Another major reference that hovers throughout the text is cybernetics, a science invented by N. Wiener (1989/1950) in the 1950s, particularly similar to systemic theories and catastrophe theory. But beyond a theoretical interest in this discipline, its tools are strongly criticized by Cohen, who speaks of it as a set of excessively "schematic and mechanistic" models (Cohen, 2002/1972, p. 11). On closer inspection, if the first adjective conveys the meaning and functioning of cybernetic models, the term "mechanistic" is partly inappropriate in the sense that this discipline, while applying indifferently to electronic circuits, living beings and machines, suggests models of functioning that are completely different from the typically mechanistic ones of Newtonian physics, Cartesian psychology and positivist sociology. However, what the author appreciates about this approach is the description of catastrophic events as "a typical sequence of reactions that could take place at this point and that would have a spiral, extreme, avalanche effect" (Cohen, 2002/1972, p. 11). In other words, what arouses the interest of the sociologist is the notion of positive feedback which, far from being accurately described in the book, is rather implicitly suggested to show how a process of successive solicitations tends to distance the system from its equilibrium, pushing it towards disequilibrium and disintegration. But Cohen cannot help but underline the substantial differences between the patterns that preside over the development of natural events and those that instead affect society in the form of cultural catastrophes.

To express the difference in another way, while the disaster sequence is linear and constant — in each disaster the warning is followed by the impact which is followed by the reaction — deviance models are circular and amplifying: the impact (deviance) is followed by a reaction which has the effect of increasing the subsequent warning and impact, setting up a feedback system (Cohen, 2002/1972, p. 18).

"Feedback" is in this case the way in which the system reacts to the deviation from equilibrium induced by the phenomenon of deviance, triggering a series of procedures that tend to sanction, stereotype and contain the deviance. The following diagram summarizes and describes in an exemplary manner the process of positive feedback that is the basis of the model developed by Cohen who, however, did not want to codify this procedure in purely cybernetic terms. "Positive" feedback does not indicate a process with a value connotation (positive as in favorable or desirable) but rather the sense, the direction of a progressive deviation of the system from its position of equilibrium, due to an emerging factor. This factor, which in this case is the phenomenon of juvenile deviance, is processed within a circuit in which each stage amplifies the unbalancing potential of the previous one (for this reason positive). As in the following graph, drawn up to better illustrate the mechanics of moral panic in a real loop that is triggered starting from the onset of the deviant act, but which then continues to function in a self-referential and potentially catastrophic circuit.

If the original edition does not problematize the origin of the concept of "moral panic", in a note in the introduction to the third edition the author admits to having "probably derived" it from Marshall McLuhan's famous *Understanding media* (2002/1964). This fact should not be surprising, not only because at that time the times were not yet ripe for McLuhan to be considered an essential reference in the debate on the media, but also because, far from considering the Canadian mediologist as a structural-functionalist, his links with cybernetic and systemic thought



are quite evident. More than the definition of moral panic, the concept of *breaking point* is very close to McLuhan's system, this too in a certain sense circular and expansive so that with the uncontrolled growth of a phenomenon something unexpected happens: the phenomenon turns into its opposite. Cohen also stresses that, unlike natural disasters that usually follow a linear pattern, deviance models adhere to "circular and expansive" models. Circularity itself is taken into serious consideration not only by systemic and cybernetic theories but also by the methodology of the most advanced social research that has long ago overcome the debate between induction and deduction to focus on the concept of abduction (Campelli, 2011). Furthermore, the way in which the function of the stereotype is considered closely resembles a classic epistemological theme of institutional sociology, namely the so-called Thomas theorem much discussed by R. K. Merton (1949). The stereotype is therefore primarily a tool of knowledge, even if reductionist and tautological, later also becomes a tool for reproducing power. To grasp this transition, it might make sense to move from sociological to anthropological and psychological reflection, thanks to the category of fetishism.

The labeling procedures activated by the media are, in fact, a process of symbolizing certain traits of subcultures, which are emphasized in order to redefine the global form (gestalt) in a negative value sense (the popular demon). This is similar to the seizure of Jean Genet's belt and Vaseline recounted by Hebdige (1979), around which a power struggle is hinged between the writer's tormentors and his "tactical" possibility of defining a space of freedom through deviance from the norm. As Cohen emphasizes, quoting Becker: "The deviant is a subject to whom the moral label has been successfully applied: deviant behavior is the behavior so labeled by people" (Cohen, 2002/1972, p. 50).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Abruzzese, A., & Barile, N. (2001). *Communifashion: Sulla moda, della comunicazione*. Sossella.
 Barile, N. (2022). *Communication in the new hybrid ontologies: From platform to the metaverse*.

- Bocconi University Press.
- Campelli, E. (2011). *Il soggetto e la regola: Problemi dell'individuazione in sociologia*. Franco Angeli.
- Cohen, P. (1972). *Sub-cultural conflict and working class community* (W.P.C.S. 2). University of Birmingham.
- Cohen, S. (2002). *Folk devils and moral panic* (original work published 1972). Routledge.
- Cristante, S. (1983). *Giovani al doppio gin*. In Cristante, S., Di Cerbo, A., & Spinucci, G. (Eds.), *La rivolta dello stile: Tendenze e segnali dalla subculture giovanili del Pianeta Terra*. Franco Angeli.
- Hall, S., & Jefferson, T. (1976). Resistance through rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain. *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, 7/8.
- Hebdige, D. (1979). *Subculture: The meaning of style*. Routledge.
- Hebdige, D. (1988). *Hiding in the light: On images and things*. Psychology Press.
- Hodkinson, P. (2016). *Media, culture and society: An introduction*. Sage.
- Klein, N. (2000). *No logo: Taking aim at the brand bullies*. Knopf.
- McLuhan, M. H. (2002). *Understanding media: The extensions of man* (10th ed.; original work published 1964). MIT Press.
- McRobbie, A., & Thornton, L. (1995). Rethinking "moral panic" for multi-mediated social worlds. *British Journal of Sociology*, 46(4).
- Marcus, G. E., & Fischer, M. M. J. (1998). *Antropologia come critica culturale*. Meltemi.
- Merton, R. K. (1949). *Social theory and social structure*. Free Press.
- Moore, S. (1990). Texts, readers, and contexts of reading: Developments in the study of media audiences. In *Media, culture and society* (Vol. XII, pp. 9–29). Sage.
- Morin, E. (1962). *L'esprit du temps* [The spirit of the time]. Grasset.
- Polhemus, T. (1994). *Streetstyle: From sidewalk to catwalk*. Thames and Hudson.
- Reynolds, S. (2011). *Retromania: Pop culture's addiction to its own past*. Faber & Faber.
- Simone, A. (2017). La prostituta nata: Lombroso, la sociologia giuridico-penale e la produzione della devianza femminile. [The born prostitute: Lombroso, legal-criminal sociology, and the production of female deviance]. *Materiali per una storia della cultura giuridica*, 2, 383–398. <https://doi.org/10.1436/87987>
- Taylor, R. and Ward, A. (1995). *Kicking and Screaming: An Oral History of Football in England*. Robson Books.
- Thornton, S. (1996). *Club cultures: Music, media, and subcultural capital*. Wesleyan University Press.
- Wiener, N. (1989). *The Human Use Of Human Beings*. Free Association Books. (Original work published 1950).

Author Biograthy

Nello Barile is Associate Professor at the Department of Communication at IULM University (Milan), where he teaches Sociology of Media and Sociology of Fashion. His research interests include sociology of media and communication, culture, fashion, consumption, and politics. He has published numerous books, articles, and short essays in Italy as well as in USA, UK, France, Germany, Spain, Brazil, and Russia. One of his latest books is *Communication in the New Hybrid Ontologies: From Platform to the Metaverse* (2022).

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC4.0) which allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator.