

editorial

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Panic: 'A sudden feeling of alarm or fear of sufficient intensity or uncontrollableness as to lead to extravagant or wildly unthinking behaviour, such as that which may spread through a crowd of people' (OED). The god who provokes it is Pan, the ancient, goat-legged god of shepherds and their flocks, of wild places, and of a primitive flute-music which gives rise to trance, sexual arousal or irrational fear. For cultural studies the concept has most powerfully been expressed in the notion of the moral panic, first articulated in Stanley Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (1972). The force of Cohen's argument was to give both a historical and a sociological dimension to the scapegoating of groups felt to be threatening: witches, dark-skinned immigrants, youth or criminal subcultures perceived as deviant. The moral panic is what Anna Gibbs calls an 'affect contagion' and it has centrally to do with the behaviour of crowds, particularly the virtual crowds created by the mass media. It's a mechanism of expulsion, and thus at the same time of group solidarity. It's also a particularly powerful genre of the tabloid media: in its identification and shaming of deviant social groups it rigidly defines and reinforces moral norms, and is complicit with political strategies of consolidation and othering which create and depend on a sense of horror at refugees who wilfully throw their children overboard or push in to the front of the 'queue', at paedophiles grooming children over the internet, at drug-crazed criminals and bingeing teenagers ... It's in the excess of such emotions over the evidence that we can see quite clearly the affective basis of our social institutions. But did we ever think they were rationally constructed? The challenge is surely to move beyond the realisation that they're not to an analysis of the passionate bases of the social order, and to an understanding of how our politics might deal with this without itself falling into the contagion of panic. The diverse collection of essays gathered together in this edition takes up that challenge.