

## Book Review

### The Moral Panics of Sexuality

Breanne Fahs, Mary L. Dudy and Sarah Stage (Eds.)

Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan

2013; 280 pp.

ISBN: 9781137353160, £55/\$88.60/€65.92 (hbk), ISBN: 9781137353177, £55/\$88.60/€65.92 (e-bk).

Reviewed by: Matthew Hall, Nottingham Trent University, UK

Moral panics have always tended to be a feature of social life because societies have always attempted to control people's sexuality and ultimately their bodies, desires, knowledge and sexual diversity, either by physical coercion or psychological means (Herdt, 2009). Even in the modern neo-liberal era, which supposedly champions tolerance and freedom of expression, sexuality is still a site to be contested as Breanne Fahs, Mary L. Dudy and Sarah Stage's edited collection of essays correctly points out. This means the work is timely and essential reading for those interested in the origins, manifestations, transmission mechanisms and effects of moral panics, and also how '*nonsexual events become sexualized via moral panics just as sexual events become nonsexualized via moral panic*' (p.6). Indeed, the editors argue that moral panics of sexuality have 'been timely for at least the 700 years' covered in the pages of the book (p.2).

Developed from papers presented at a 'Sexualities in Research and Practice Conference', the collection is unapologetically radical in perspective and overtly political, feminist and anti-right-wing conservatism. The progressive stance of the selected authors means one of the book's strengths is that it covers a variety of novel material and interesting perspectives. In particular, the editors have attempted to move away from the more traditional focus on sexuality and young age, which seems to be forever on the political agenda (Herdt, 2009). For example, a current moral panic about sexuality in the UK concerns the age of

consent. Prime Minister David Cameron rejected a proposal for a lower age of consent which was intended to make it easier for teenagers to get sexual health advice from the National Health Service so ultimately reducing unwanted pregnancies and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. The PM was reported to be concerned that lowering the UK age of consent from 16 to 15 would authorize predatory adults to focus their attentions on even younger teenagers, and would also send out a message that sex between younger teenagers is acceptable (BBC, November 17, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-24976929>).

Instead of engaging with such stories, the book unpacks the individual elements associated with panics. It is divided into five parts which examine the origins, processes, discourses, materialities and institutions of moral panics in relation to gender, race, class and sexual hierarchies. Part One addresses the problematizing of female desire with two chapters focusing specifically on the vagina and femininity, by Michelle Ashley Gohr and Ellen J. Stockstill respectively. Part Two examines the control of bodies through social norms. Sara I. McClelland and L.E. Hunter discuss women's bodies and age, Breanne Fahs considers the body process of menstruation and Sarah Prior interrogates how popular media can both challenge and transmit cultural norms. Part Three looks at and beyond national borders in relation to consumption, particularly the conflation of homosexuality and cannibalism, in the chapter by Ayaan Agane. Rachael Bryne discusses how nations can become sexualized. Part Four demonstrates how moral panics of sexuality can be strategically deployed against women, in Sarah Stage's chapter, and also against the gay community, in Jordan O'Connell's chapter. The concluding section of the book engages with how moral panics of sexuality are incited, with reference to disability, in Brooke Willock's chapter, menstruation, in Bianca Jarvis's chapter, and homosexuality in Michael McNamara's chapter. The obvious strength of each individual chapter is the depth and attention to detail, but also that they are all empirically grounded, providing the reader with 'real life' examples.

I was particularly impressed with *Raising Bloody Hell: Inciting Menstrual Panics* by Breanne Fahs because although it demonstrated the enactment of power, it also interestingly highlighted some means by which social processes might be resisted. For example, on one of Fahs' modules at Arizona State University, she divided the students into six groups, tasking each group with publically profiling menstruation. Some of the ways the students did this were by distributing menstrual products to fe/male students and staff with detailed information on the menstrual cycle. Menstrual safety concerns with possible interventions highlighted under the heading REDSCAM with the distribution of posters and fliers and student interviews. General awareness was raised and attitudes collected with the development of a specific Facebook page. A stall was set up in a gas station offering a free box of tampons with Japanese anime 'Period Girls' stuck on the box and people's reactions filmed. Another group of students assessed public responses to their holding placards on the side of roads with 'Honk if you ♥ sex during menstruation'. The final group of students staged a theatrical event in which a student with bloodied white trousers walked through a department store. Responses were filmed and a flier handed out. All the groups of students reported being shocked at the amount of negative response to their activisms, particularly from men and university officials. Many men refused to touch anything related to menstruation.

Despite the book's clear strengths, there were several noticeable omissions. First, most of the chapters center on women and gay men in some form or other. Admittedly, the authors state from the outset that the book is overtly feminist but, since they claim moral panics extend to 'queer, colored, poor, fat, old, 'foreign' and disabled bodies' (p. 5), I would have liked to see a wider scope, perhaps including writings on interracial, intergenerational and between-class sex. In my opinion, the omission of a greater breadth of topics is a missed opportunity and risks presenting a narrow perspective to students and newcomers. Secondly,

the book could perhaps have been strengthened by contributors critically engaging with each other. Here I was left wondering whether parallels, links and strategies could be drawn between the activism of Breanne Fahs' students, the strategic deployment of a marginalized identity, as in Jordan O'Connell's study of Wisconsin congressman Steve Gunderson or Brooke Wilcock's critique of the discourses of sexual rights and rhetoric of privacy, autonomy and health, to bring about changes in people's knowledge and understanding of others' sexualities and bodies. In my opinion, this is a missed opportunity to identify potential points of resistance. A final point, given the increasing amount of time we spend accessing online applications (according to one source, almost half our waking day :OFCOM, 2010) via televisions, smart phones, laptops and other communication devices, it would have been good to see a thorough engagement with social and digital media and how they facilitate moral panics of sexuality.

But despite these reservations, I am well aware that mapping, contextualizing and illustrating the origins and contemporary manifestations of a range of moral panics of sexuality is a difficult undertaking, and even more so, if the intended audience is interdisciplinary and both specialist and undergraduate. The various scholarly contributions in this collection are written in a succinct, clear and accessible style which is suitable for newcomers to the subject. The outcome is a major accomplishment, making this book indispensable as both a learning and a teaching resource.

## **References**

BBC (2013). PM rejects call to lower age of consent to 15. November 17. Retrieved January 17, from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-24976929>.

Herd, G. (2009). *Moral Panics, Sex Panics: Fear and the Fight Over Sexual Rights* (Intersections: Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Genders and Sexualities Series). New York: New York University Press.

Office of Communications. (2010). TV, phones and Internet take up almost half our waking hours. Retrieved February, 13, 2013 from <http://consumers.ofcom.org.uk/2010/08/tv-phones-and-Internet-take-up-almost-half-our-waking-hours/>