

**SOCI 360**

**SOCIAL  
MOVEMENTS  
AND  
COMMUNITY  
CHANGE**

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(DR. K)**



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**“Social Contagion”  
and  
“Moral Panics”**



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**Early Theories of Collective Behavior**

**1. Social Contagion Theory (Locher Chp 2)**

Gustav LeBon, “The Crowd...”, 1895 (p12)



- i. Trying to explain the violence of the **French Revolution**; (p12-13)
- ii. **Crowds diminish free-will**; all members of a crowd are diminished in their reasoning capacities to the least intelligent, roughest, and most violent. (p13)
- iii. Individuals feel **invincible and anonymous; suggestibility reigns** (p14)
- iv. **Critique**: overly literal view of contagion, not scientific, eschews free-will



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## Early Theories of Collective Behavior

### 2. Social Contagion Theory (symbolic interaction)

Robert Park, "The Crowd and the Public", 1904 (p16)



- i. **Emergent interaction:** more attuned to others; circular reaction occurs, spreading contagion (p16)
- ii. **First to define "collective behavior"** (but vaguely) (p17)
- iii. **Crowd members act irrationally** (p17)
- iv. **Park contributes** more to an understanding of the *social nature* of crowd formation. (p18)

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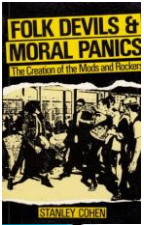
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## Early Theories of Collective Behavior

### 3. Social Contagion Theory (symbolic interaction)

Stanley Cohen, "Folk Devils and Moral Panics", 1972 (np)



- i. "Folk Devils" are deviants stigmatized by the those who are believed to threaten the social order (np)
- ii. Moral Entrepreneurs may arise to point out the existence of "folk devils" (often erroneously) (p17)
- iii. Moral Panics are a form of collective behavior acting in response to the combination of perceived folk devils in our midst and moral entrepreneurs encouraging others to act. (np)

*Recent Examples of Moral Panics*

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## Early Theories of Collective Behavior

*Recent Examples of Moral Panics*

3. Following Cohen (1972), Goode and Ben Yehuda (1994) argue a **moral panic** has the following features:

- a. **Concern** – an event sparks social anxiety.
- b. **Hostility** – a subculture is seen as 'folk devils' who are looked upon with hostility.
- c. **Consensus** – fear of this subculture becomes the dominant narrative in media and social discussion.
- d. **Disproportionality** – The threat is exaggerated
- e. **Volatility** – A moral panic emerges and disappears suddenly (often when another moral panic takes its place).



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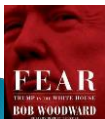
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## Early Theories of Collective Behavior

### 4. What moral panics exist today?

Perhaps the most troubling use of the idea of "witch hunts" today (2021) involve politics. While legitimately indicted for his alleged crimes, the former President uses the "witch hunt" metaphor to try to convince his followers he is innocent.

Meanwhile, acting as the premiere "moral entrepreneur" of the age (despite his own demonstrated immorality), the former President has tried to incite a variety of fear campaigns, around immigrants ("murderers and rapists"), [the media \("fake news"\)](#), the [Great Replacement](#), and the BIG LIE about the so-called "rigged election."



**Stoking this last fear about voting, Trump inspired the insurrection of Jan. 6, a profoundly undemocratic (and illegal) attempt to seize power. Accepting a loss in a free election is the basis of democracy.**

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Image from the January 6 insurrection at the Capitol building [\(click for more\)](#) (source: abqraw.com)



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Image from Trump's January 6 "Ellipse Rally" prior to the insurrection at the capital [\(click for more\)](#)



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