U-CARE
Urban Culture Against Racism in Europe

Moral Panic: A U-CARE Methodology Tool for Training Trainers

W1: Exchange of Good Practice and Curriculum Development

2. Exchange Seminar in Budapest (March 2013), focus on Right Wing populism, Anti-Roma-Racism and Anti-European resentment

Moral Panics

The concept of *moral panic* was developed by sociologist Stanley Cohen in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics (1972)*, a study of deviant groups – society's 'folk devils' – and the public and media reaction to them. Nowadays it is used as a reliable analytical tool in a sociological approach concerning social discrimination; especially when discrimination is analysed as a result of a 'constructive' reality through populist oversimplifications.

As Stanley Cohen says "*more moral panics will be generated and other, as yet nameless, folk devils will be created... our society as presently structured will continue to generate problems for some of its members... and then condemn whatever solution these groups find".* Some of the main negative stereotypes for immigrants-refugees, racial-ethnic-religious minorities, Jews-Muslims, leftists, artists, homosexuals, drug users, single mothers, musical subcultures, video game players etc, have been based on methodical and systematic moral panics in the past. These moral panics start from the media and are reproduced by the public with great ease through social media and everyday public dialogue.

The result of this thoughtless reproduction of unjustified information is the mass acceptance of a single – usually, excessive and simplistic – version of reality as the only truthful and the condemnation of any other pluralistic interpretation of the social world as dangerous or/and naive.

By using the concept of 'moral panic' as an analytical tool we could facilitate both ourselves and the U-Care trained trainers to recognize the characteristics, the techniques and methodologies of moral panics, to reverse them by strong expressive means (performances, artistic activities, cultural activism, media and public campaigns) and so, to question crucially the simplistic interpretations that lead to social discrimination, racism and xenophobia.

Moral Panic

A moral panic is a situation characterized by social anxiety about a group, an idea or a circumstance. This condition is caused by selective reproduction of information and stereotypes that affect the social and moral status of a whole social group (i.e. immigrants steal the jobs of the host country nationals). The affected social group is treated with hostility and considered as a threat to the social order. In this process, time plays important role. The threat is presented as immediate and provokes social 'defensive' reflexes.

The objects of moral panics are rather predictable; so too are the discursive forms used to represent them. For example:

- they are *new* (caused by unprecedented conditions) - but also *old* (camouflaged versions of traditional and well-know evils),
- they are damaging *in themselves* – but also merely *warning signs* of the real, much deeper and more prevalent condition,
- they are *transparent* (anyone can see what's happening) – but also *opaque*: accredited experts – or journalists - must explain the perils hidden behind the superficially harmless (i.e. high birth rate of immigrant population will destroy the national and cultural identity of the host countries).

For a successfully constructed moral panic **three elements** are needed:

(a) <u>a suitable enemy</u>: a soft target, easily denounced, with little power and preferably without even access to the battlefields of cultural politics (immigrants, refugees, other county nationals, people who survive by the state benefits, minorities) ,

(b) <u>a suitable victim</u>: someone with whom you can identify, someone who could have been and one day could be anybody (the audience),

(c) <u>a consensus</u> that the beliefs or action being denounced were not an insulated incident/event ('it's not only this') but integral parts of the society or else could (and would) be unless 'something was done'.

Tips:

In several cases of successful moral panics the used phraseology is related to natural disasters (flood of immigrants, waves of terror, plague of violence etc).

Some of the crucial elements that make up the story have indisputably been used while, in reality, they have never been documented.

Attention! "*Calling something a 'moral panic' does not imply that this something does not exist or happened at all and that reaction is based on fantasy, hysteria, delusion and illusion or being duped by the powerful. Two related assumptions, though, require attention – that the attribution of the moral panic label means that the 'thing's' extent and significance has been exaggerated (a) in itself (compared with other more reliable, valid and objective sources) and/or (b) compared with other, more serious problems. This labelling derives from a willful refusal by the liberals, radicals and leftists to take public anxieties seriously. Instead, they are furthering a politically correct agenda: to downgrade traditional values and moral concerns*" (Stanley Cohen, Folk Devils and Moral Panics, third edition, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. x).

Moral Panic as a tool for awareness rising and urban art productions

In order to get an idea how the concept could be used as a U-Care tool let's follow the below stages of a workshop activity:

1. Choose a news story or well-know event that causes public hostility towards a social group (i.e. a murder of a native person committed by immigrants).
2. Discuss the news story with the participants and try to facilitate them to express feelings and knowledge they already have about the story, or even behaviors-actions with which they could agree. Avoid to evaluate opinions, beliefs and ideas of the participants.
3. Try to write down characteristic words, phrases or narratives and personal experiences, especially those not directly related to the story (examples that participants use to express themselves). These words-phrases-experiences will be used in the second phase of the workshop.
4. Pause the open discussion (it is advisable to take a break to release participants from the process of expressing personal views, because the next workshop phase requires an objective analysis).
5. Introduce the concept of moral panic, and describe its main characteristics. Try now to analyse the news story using the concept of moral panic as a analytical tool: For example you could try to consider:

   • Who is the direct and indirect victim (who can be identified with these roles)?

   • Who is the offender (is a person, group, condition; describe his/her social status; has he/she social power and influence)?

   • Which social group is targeted or/and which group/s face its social status to getting worse after this incident (i.e. difficulties faced by Muslims after 9/11)?

   • Who is benefited by this incident (specific social groups, the media, the political and economical elite, etc)?

   • This news story is presented as insulated incident or as part of a continuing problem which constantly challenge the public reaction? Are there any persons or/and groups who believe "something must be done"?

   • Activate existing knowledge and feelings?

   • Are implicit knowledge and feelings significant for the interpretation of the incident?

ΣΥΝΕΡΓΕΙΟ ΜΟΥΣΙΚΟΥ ΘΕΑΤΡΟΥ

Try to de-construct the news story in its basic elements (Wikipedia: "Deconstruction is a form of semiotic analysis, derived mainly from French philosopher Jacques Derrida's 1967 work of Grammatology. Derrida proposed the deconstruction of all texts where binary oppositions are used in the construction of meaning and values").

6. Use of improvisation games to put in practice the above basic elements of the news story.
7. Reverse the meaning of some basic elements of the news story and create alternative scenarios (i.e. exchange the characteristics of the victim and the offender, or instead of murdering describe an act of love keeping all the other elements the same, or try to describe the story fully justifying the offender, etc).
8. Discuss all the alternative scenarios and try to adapt some of the words-phrases-experiences that have been documented in the 3rd stage of the workshop. The difficult or unsuccessful adaptation of some of those into alternative scenarios could prove that the meaning of words, phrases and experiences depends on the context (i.e. criminality of immigrants usually have more threatening meaning in comparison with criminality of nationals).
9. Comment as a team on the pros and cons of the methodology. Try to use some of the ideas and scenarios that have been created during the workshop for future urban art performances against racism and xenophobia.