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**Sex Panic, Welfare, and the Police State**  
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In the wake of the 2004 presidential election, one observer noted: "The Democrats' mistake was thinking that a disastrous war and national bankruptcy would be of concern to the electorate. The Republicans saw, correctly, that the chief concern of the electorate was to keep gay couples from having abortions," (Ricardo Dominguez, personal communication, January 31, 2005). Instead of the election becoming a referendum on a war begun under the auspices of missing weapons of mass destruction which never materialized, a sex panic over abortion and a homosexual menace shifted the course of debate. Faced with the threat to their civilization, the electorate awarded Bush a second term. With victory in hand, Bush claimed a mandate to dismantle core foundations of the U.S. welfare state.

The 2004 election was not the first time a sex panic had struck fear into U.S. politics while undermining support for public welfare. Panic has accompanied countless shifts in the ways public policy emerges and fades from public life. 2006 marks the tenth anniversary of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, the culmination of a generation-long erosion in support for basic provisions of the U.S. social safety net. As this anniversary approaches, it is worthwhile to consider the political campaign that undermined support for one the last vestiges of the New Deal. While conservatives consider welfare reform a success, others describe the 1996 law as regressive and punitive (Abramovitz, 2000).

Explanations vary as to when Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) first lost support. A number of studies suggest that the racialization of welfare is the primary reason for the loss of confidence in the program (Schram et al., 2003). Others suggest that since 90% of the program's recipients are women, sexism is a primary cause for the program's lack of popularity (Abramovitz, 2005). I suggest a series of sex and moral panics undermined support for the welfare state, leading to the 1996 "reform."

Paralleling the demise of the welfare state, there has been a proliferation of literature on sex and moral panics (Cohen, 1972/2002; Duggan, 1995). Studies of the discursive contours of moral panics highlight the ideological quandaries at the center of thirty years of debate over social welfare policy. A number of recent comparative studies of current welfare policies (Sidell, 1998; Wagner, 1997) have specifically located conditions of moral panic within policy debates over public assistance and services for the poor. Other studies (Abramovitz, 2000) consider the increase in policies aimed at the moral regulation of the sexual lives of those on public assistance. These works consider the simultaneous social control of deviance and backlashes concerning public sexuality that inspire sex and moral panics.

Studies of sex and moral panics investigate social hierarchies. Thus, these studies become inquiries into social tensions, as themes of gender, race, crime, and social upheaval are projected onto charged acts, including public sex, non-monogamy, and teenage pregnancy. These symbolic acts - and the calls for their suppression - can be used to assess shifts in social life, including demands for the overhaul of the welfare state.

Duggan (1995) argues:

Sex panics, witch hunts, and red scares are staples of American history. While often promoted by relatively powerless but vocal minorities hostile to cultural difference, they have been enthusiastically taken up by powerful groups in an effort to impose rigid orthodoxy on the majority. In this context, "moral reforms" and the like have been the public relations mask for what is in fact an abnegation of any responsibility to confront and address very real problems, that is poverty, militarism, sexism, and racism (p. 75).

The concept of sex panic builds on the idea of moral panic first coined within British sociology and cultural studies. As theorists grappled with public policies aimed at alleviating social problems such as AIDS, homelessness, and poverty, conceptions of moral panic overlapped with debates about the urban "underclass." Of the many panics that have emerged over the last thirty years, sex and moral panics over welfare share many themes and discursive contours as a racialized, dehumanizing view of women on welfare combined with anxiety about shifts in the nuclear family fuel such panics. Sociologist Stanley Cohen (1972/2002) suggests that as cultural institutions draw parameters around deviance, they create moral panics. The moral panic scapegoat becomes a "folk devil" onto whom cultural anxieties can be projected. With the welfare panic, the folk devil in question has consistently been the promiscuous "welfare queen."

Most panics involve unsanctioned activities or cultural groupings that threaten the status quo or the traditional family. This helps explain the rise of panics around teenage pregnancy (Luker, 1996; Sidell). In some cases, panics involve questions about the control of vice known or believed to lead to disease (Wagner, 1997). This is where panics over sex and drug use overlap with public health issues ranging from HIV prevention to the use of birth control. Recent years have witnessed increased crackdowns on public spaces where social outsiders meet to build networks and establish contact (Dangerous Bedfellows, 1996). Other panics involved use

of public resources for family planning services or to support art not considered appropriate by social conservatives (Luker; Duggan, 1995). Thus, recognition of panic initiates a question about democratic political process and debate, who and what is appropriate within political discourse.

Each marker of panic has significance as a cultural symbol. French structuralist philosopher Michel Foucault described the social and linguistic construction of such symbols as “discourses.” By discourse, he referred to a linkage of symbolic representations to a social actions and actors. Their interaction produces social meanings embodied by cultural “objects,” including those that become the subjects of moral panics (Zukin, 1995). One approach to studying sex panics is to analyze “discourses” which establish hierarchies of the normal, moral, or worthy (Thompson, 1998).

In a study of the birth of the modern prison, Foucault (1977) asserts, “A corpus of knowledge, techniques, ‘scientific’ discourses is formed and becomes entangled with the practice of power to punish.” (p. 23). Here, tools of professional knowledge, diagnosis, and assessment create the discourses which influence the ways actors are rendered sane and insane, healthy and unhealthy, normal and abnormal, worthy and unworthy. These discourses transmit forms of what Foucault describes as “bio-power.” Government programs, from police to social services, use bio-power to regulate and control. Here, individual desires are regulated, sanctioned, organized, even dictated by dominant social, economic, and cultural discourses - mechanisms of the normal.

Discourses over worthy versus unworthy sexuality address a central concern of modern life: the besieged nuclear family. Thompson (1998) explains, “Familial ideology is obliged to fight a continual rear guard action in order to disavow the social and sexual diversification of a culture which can never be adequately pictured in the traditional guise of the family of cohabitating parents and children” (pp.72-73).

Political scientist James Morone (2003) suggests panic discourse functions within a familiar schema. In times of social flux interest groups: One, stir a moral frenzy; Two, identify a demon; Three, mobilize interests; and Four, increase police powers. These “panics,” which can be traced to the country’s earliest days.

Panic discourse establishes the context in which U.S. social policy forms and shifts, particularly as the welfare state has become a space for contestation (Davey, 1995). Moral panics over public welfare involve four core themes: laziness, drugs, violence, and, of course, sex, which makes the other three pale in comparison. Morone (2003) argues, “Here lies the central moral theme and the most unsettling bundle of questions. Sexuality challenges the fundamental Puritan precept: control thyself.” (p. 17) explains. Mixed with debates about gender, the politics of sex involves struggles over abortion, divorce, queerness, women’s rights, and most importantly the control over children and family. Thus, social controls are asserted over sex and marriage as markers, boundaries between a civilized us and a dangerous them. Responses to these sins tend to fall into solutions based on pledges of abstinence, restrictions on reproductive services, increased funding for police, and more get-tough laws, all part of the proverbial “Thou shalt not!” (p. 17).

What emerges is a series of competing narratives that typically accompany discussions of public sexuality. Feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser (1989) suggests such discourses involve struggles between affect mobilization and social control. While some advance the cause of social movements aimed at the alleviation of poverty, others advance the panicked anti-welfare rhetoric, which distracts rather than creates solutions to struggles related to poverty alleviation, social inequality and movement mobilization. Debates over social welfare intersect with these competing narratives, some aimed at increasing social mobility and personal freedom; others

involve and call for moral regulation and social controls, which halt the advances of social outsiders, such as queers and women on welfare into fuller democratic participation.

### From Welfare State to Police State

While the era of big government in the realm of social programs ended with the failure of Clinton's healthcare initiative in 1994 and the passage of welfare reform in 1996, big government in the arena of policing only expanded with the passage of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 and the Patriot Act of 2001. While rates of crime had decreased over the twenty years from 1975 to 1995, evidence of moral panics over crime control could be witnessed in states across the union (Platt, 1995). Panic over race helped legitimize the shift in public expenditures from health and supportive services toward policies aimed at social control.

Thus, over the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the policy landscape in the U.S. shifted from an emphasis on public welfare toward crime control - from a welfare state to a police state (Davey, 1995). Today, sociologist Sharon Zukin (1995) explains: "the fastest growing kind of public space in America is prisons." (p.24) These prisons are part of a frenzied drive to support neoconservative polities favoring a better business climate for neoliberal economic polices poised to privatize, control, and profit from everything from water to public space to social welfare services. Panic discourse advanced this process.

The presence of people on welfare has constantly been accompanied by panic. Discourses of decline resulted in calls for criminalization rather than service provision and public welfare. And a profound shift unfolded. The welfare state shrunk while police and military expenditures increased. As far back as 1964, Frankfurt School social theorist Herbert Marcuse eluded to a merging of mass media, corporate power, and the blurring of social welfare into ever-greater social control. "The society of total mobilization, which takes shape in the most advanced areas of industrial civilization, combines in productive union the features of the Welfare State and the Warfare State," Here, Marcuse (1964) explains, "The main trends are familiar: concentration of the national economy on the needs of big corporations, with the government as a stimulating, supporting, and sometimes even controlling force." (p. 19) Along the road, the mass media, public opinion, and market pressure creative a coercive context that blur opposites and opposition, further eroding the line between welfare and social control. If the journey from welfare state to warfare state has an overarching theme, it is the use of distraction to support the re-appropriations that allow the military- corporate-industrial complex to expand and thrive. Thus the expression "moral politics," functions as a code-word for a call for an increased warfare state.

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