

Elisa Giomi, Fabrizio Tonello

Moral Panic: the Issue of Women and Crime in Italian Evening News. A Reply to Comments

(doi: 10.2383/75776)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2013

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Moral Panic: the Issue of Women and Crime in Italian Evening News

A Reply to Comments

by Elisa Giomi *and* Fabrizio Tonello

doi: 10.2383/75776

Firstly, we would like to thank our colleagues who have given their time and intellect to discuss the issues presented in our essay. We are grateful to them and to the anonymous reviewers who have allowed us to offer a better final version of our paper to the readers.

The focus of the three comments is clearly the notion of “moral panic” and we want to respond to some observations, starting with those of Professor Corradi. She writes:

Can we apply the 2006 findings to subsequent years? The authors believe this is the case [...] Here, Giomi and Tonello’s discussion is less compelling. The main reason is that the notion of moral panic, which is used as a theoretical framework to the survey, cannot be generalized to media discourse, but it must always be empirically tested. “Panic events come and go,” they write [p. 17]. Quite true, as panic is an emotion, so it is unstable by definition. But to say that it just goes out of fashion is sociologically meaningless. Additionally, Cohen’s definition of moral panic is almost always associated with deviance and it implies delusion or manipulation of events. The authors reinforce this argument by referring to Surette’s “law”. But is this always the case?

For these reasons, Professor Corradi is sceptical about the fact that “Cohen’s moral panic can be applied to the present [2012-2013] status of femicide in media coverage.”

We regret not having been clearer in our conclusion: we *do not* apply the concept of moral panic to the present wave of media coverage. We did not analyse data for 2012-2013, therefore we cannot draw any conclusion on this issue because we agree with professor Corradi that moral panics “must always be empirically tested.”

When we wrote “the panic of 2006-2007 was out of fashion, we are now ready for a new one,” we simply registered the presence of a factor indicated by Cohen at the very beginning of his research: “Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten [...] at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions” [Cohen 2002, 1].

Panics are ephemeral, yet we do not share Corradi’s explanation: “As panic is an emotion, it is therefore unstable by definition.” This certainly is true at the individual level, but at the societal level “moral panics” should be seen more as *conditions*, states of public opinion that are quickly embedded in procedures, routines, forms of punishments, and institutions. These conditions often have “serious and long-lasting repercussions” even if the original threat disappears, or it is revealed as non-existent. These *comings and goings* of panics are part and parcel of social dynamics, they are not “sociologically meaningless.” There are “issue-attention” cycles that are related to power struggles and can be studied [Downs 1972].

We agree with Maneri [2001]:

Moral panics constitute an effective theatre which represents the links joining on the one hand politicians, social control agents and the media, and on the other hand, “the people.” In particular, politicians become legitimised as representatives and – along with the institutions of social control – protectors; the media as a spokesperson.”

Corradi also writes: “Over-reporting creates distorted emotions and perceptions, and for Giomi and Tonello, it leads to the law of opposite. But the 2012-2013 coverage is a case in which what the media represent is *not* the opposite of what is true.” We did not discuss any “over-reporting” of murders with women as victims, much less that it “leads to the law of opposite.” We mentioned Surette only in passing, and certainly do not consider this as an expression of a “law” in the scientific meaning of the word. Here is the citation:

Whatever the media show is the opposite of what is true [...] the entertainment media present a world of crime and justice that is not found in reality.

In our essay this was a reference to the 2006 coverage, when the role of partners and ex-partners in women’s murders was obscured by the anti-immigrant campaign. We do not include the 2012-2013 coverage on which we reiterate, we have no position, having not researched the topic. Finally, Corradi’s comment that:

Giomi and Tonello seemingly refer to topics such as gender violence, rape, sexual violence, violence against women, and the killing of infants and children as if they are the same phenomenon.

This seems to us unwarranted. We certainly do not consider these phenomena as equivalents. There was only one goal in our table that included the ten most covered news items, that of showing how nine of them included women and children as victims and were clearly considered more newsworthy than other social categories in the eyes of journalists and media executives.

Other remarks by Professor Corradi revolve around the notion of “gender violence” dealt with in our paper. Her first observation concerns the use of the term “domestic violence”: we acknowledge that it lacks precision and agree with Corradi that “victims are at a higher risk of femicide at the time of divorce, separation or estrangement from the perpetrator, and this cannot be described as a domestic setting.” It would have been better to use the term “intimate relationship violence.” Corradi says the following:

The authors argue that qualitative analysis of the seven high-profile cases confirm “the processes that are at work in the discourse of violence against women in Italian news coverage” [p. 14]; however, out of these seven cases, three are multiple killings or family massacres. Should any homicide incident, in which there is at least one female victim, be classified as gender violence?

Of course not, perhaps we should have provided a clearer definition of our understanding of violence against women in the context of this paper, as this is an aspect the other commentators have focused on as well. Specifically, as the inclusion of family massacres in our corpus is also criticized by Professor Deriu, a more detailed answer will be provided below. At this point, we only want to stress that the article’s aim was to analyse the ways in which TV newscasts treat the murders of women *tout court*, and not only the cases of femicide (the very title of the article does not mention “gendered violence,” “femicide,” or “violence against women” but just “women and crime”); this is the reason why in our database for example, we also included the murders of women that occurred during armed robberies.

That said, we argue that “the qualitative analysis of the seven high-profile cases confirm the processes that are at work in the discourse of violence against women in Italian news coverage” because:

a) These cases are paradigmatic of the selection criteria and news values discussed in our quantitative analysis, firstly for the high visibility of murders perpetrated by foreigners (all 7 high-profile cases involved one or more foreigner(s) as suspect(s);

b) Even though three out of seven are family massacres, therefore the female victims involved are not murdered *because* they are women, they are treated exactly in the same ways as the victims of the other four cases (of femicide):

1. All of them are idealized;

2. Idealization, in all the cases, draws on the sexual history of the victims and on their conformity to traditional gender role models;

3. Idealization stresses the victims' innocence and, as a consequence, contributes to the stigmatisation of their (often alleged immigrant) male attackers. In short, at the discursive level, the female victims of multiple murders and those of femicide serve the same function, that is a fuelling of an anti-immigration rhetoric (and, as a side-effect, instructing women about "appropriate" sexual conduct for their gender).

Another interesting point in Corradi's comment is:

The authors state that de-gendering of violence, i.e., ignorance of the fact that it is connected with the larger structure of patriarchal domination is deemed as an important side-effect of the television news discourse [p. 14], but do not clarify how one should understand patriarchal domination. If it is defined as subordination of the socio-economic status of women within the intimate relationship or the family system, the victims only partly correspond to this description. In Italy, just as in other high-income countries, femicide victims can have high levels of education and professional life, often higher than their partners [Dugan et al. 2003; Titterington 2006]. Is this a gendered or a de-gendered situation?

In our view (and we are sure that our discussant will agree on this), patriarchal domination is not only produced through the inferior socio-economic status attributed to women, but through the "position" they are given within the society's symbolic order, too. Imagery, such as that constructed by the TV news we analysed, which fosters a normative construction of femininity, celebrating self-abnegating mothers, devoted spouses, virgins, etc., can be considered as patriarchal. The following paragraph (and the subsequent analysis) in our view, was intended to express this concept:

The patriarchal structure of control obviously characterising not only the alleged "underdeveloped" cultures described by television news but the Italian one as well, was confirmed by means of a discursive process that idealised the victims.

Last but not least, our thesis is that, along with the qualitative features of the coverage (the news discourse), the quantitative ones contribute to producing the 'side-effect' of de-gendering the murders of women: we have on the one hand, the over-reporting of cases that are statistically less diffuse and not always rooted in the gender power system (such as family massacres); on the other, the under-reporting of the most diffuse typology of lethal violence against women – the intimate relationship

one – the causes of which, on the contrary, *do* lie within gendered power relationships and within the patriarchal mentality still widespread among men, who look at women as their own property (regardless of socio-economic status).

We now turn to Professor Deriu's observations. She writes:

To start with, the perimeter of the study shows some ambiguities [...] At the beginning, the study seems to move on showing that violence against women (that is well known being acted almost exclusively by partners in domestic context), is represented by media as a crime perpetrated by strangers and ethnic minorities.

We do not deal with "violence against women," a broad category of the Istat's report cited by Deriu that includes heterogeneous behaviours like harassment, battery, rape but also psychological violence. Our study focuses only on *extreme physical violence*, that is violence that results in the death of the victim. There is no ambiguity in this.

Our colleague goes on to state that

the authors coherently choose only those news who received most coverage in the evening edition of the six most popular newscasts during the observation period (2006), and among these newsworthy there are only three out of seven cases clearly configuring a form of violence against women (Hina Salem, Jennifer Zacconi and Luciana Biggi). Three out of seven cases are family's carnages and the case of Elena Lonati is a murder that is not connected to a will of rape by the author (and this is also the only case where actually a foreign young man is the author of the violence).

Clearly, here there is a problem with the understanding of the category "violence against women" that Deriu characterizes as something "being acted almost exclusively by partners in domestic context." But this is not the way the evening news present the issue: any physical assault against a woman has been treated by TV news bulletins as a threat to a vulnerable member of society, therefore to the community itself. And this danger has been described, more often than not, as an *alien threat*, framing family massacres like the Erba case as evidence of this. Elena Lonati's murder case may or may not be "connected to a will of rape by the author" but this is completely irrelevant to the analysis of how the media covered it. Also the fact "that there is a very low percentage of women who report an assault," as professor Deriu says, is irrelevant: we have not studied the vast and complex universe of "violence against women" in Italy but only homicides, which clearly are reported and investigated.

Another point of Deriu's comment:

The problem of proportionality can be addressed by comparing the news coverage with official figures on crimes just in the case of femicide, because in this case we actually have an effective measure of the facts happened. Thus, the authors can correctly state that a few cases receive an inflated and fuzzy attention by the media.

But looking at violence against women we have to take into consideration that there is a very low percentage of women who report an assault, whatever is the type of violence they experienced [...] In this case the real spread of the phenomenon is much wider than that reported by statistics and there would not be a disproportion between the news and the events transmitted by media.

The main point of disagreement, as is often the case in the literature about moral panic, is the issue of “proportionality.” But professor Deriu’s observation is based on a misunderstanding: our aim was not to explore the phenomenon of violence against women in all its aspects: we chose only to focus on murders of women (also, only some of them can be considered as femicides, a term that we never use). Enlarging the scope of the observation would have required a different research design and process.

Professor Deriu writes that in our essay

no evidence is given on the impact that the threat presented by the media has on public concern, on the collective response given by the audience, on significant associations between the message, the public opinion and the political action.

On this, we have the impression that Deriu addresses the issue of “proportionality” from an angle which is different from the one chosen by most scholars. This does not deal with the fact that the researchers into moral panics should prove beyond reasonable doubt the “associations between the message, public opinion and political action.” In the literature, the issue of “proportionality” has been raised by scholars claiming that there is no way to establish if “official and media concern is [...] without substance or justification.” [Waddington 1986, 258]. As we wrote, “this author takes issue with Cohen’s comparison between the *dimensions of the problem* and the *dimensions of the social response* to it: “Conceptually, the notion of ‘moral panic’ lacks any criteria of proportionality without which it is impossible to determine whether concern about any [...] problem is justified or not” [*ibidem*, 246].

From this perspective, the issue is not if a political decision such as, for example, tightening immigration rules, which is linked to a moral panic about immigrant crimes. Waddington’s critique is that immigrant crimes could be a real problem, and the response of authorities is perfectly justified. There is no “panic” because the issue is handled properly. We tried to address “proportionality” in this framework.

Nevertheless, we would like to respond to this remark: “no evidence is given on the impact that the threat, presented by the media, has on public concern.” The opposite is true. We quote several polls showing the discrepancy between the *direct observation* of crime and the *general perception* of it: “In a survey from October 2007 (*before* the Reggiani killing that amplified the hysteria), 88% of respondents were sure that “crime ha[d] gone up” in the last five years. Strikingly, this quasi-unanim-

ity was not sustained by personal, direct observation: the answer to the question, has crime “gone up *in the area where you live?*” (our emphasis) was very different: only 50% of citizens agreed.” We discuss several data sources pointing in the same direction and conclude that “events of moral panic do have consequences. First the Prodi government, and later the Berlusconi government, made immigration control a priority. Several laws were passed by Parliament.” Therefore, the issue of the impact on public concern is addressed, and the political consequences too.

The discussant states that

if the authors wished to demonstrate that public opinion had been overwhelmed by moral panic they would try to investigate their reaction through adequate techniques. There are many useful data sources accessible on the web concerning people opinions, such as Twitter, Facebook, blog, thematic forum, and so forth.

Unfortunately, Twitter was founded in March 2006 in San Francisco and only became known in Italy much later. In order to analyse public opinion in 2006-2007, this platform could hardly have been a source. The same is true of Facebook, whose penetration of the Italian market only became significant in 2008. These “adequate techniques” were not available to us, even if their relevance to the task of assessing the mood of public opinion at large could have been demonstrated – a thorny methodological issue.

We agree that our case would be stronger if one could link moral panics to “political decisions which are the effect of such a phenomenon.” However, politicians themselves were eager to build this bridge: one could fill volumes with statements from first, second and third-rate ministers, senators, deputies and mayors claiming that their decisions were the response to *those* crimes. Giovanna Reggiani’s murder (which happened in 2007 and was not analysed in the context of our research into 2006) provoked the razing of a Roma camp by the then-mayor of Rome Walter Veltroni and an emergency meeting of the Prodi government that issued a decree “Disposizioni urgenti in materia di allontanamento dal territorio nazionale per esigenze di pubblica sicurezza,” n. 181/2007. We are willing to concede that politicians are prone to over-react and shout sound-bites about *Zero Tolerance* from the roof-tops, but they are able to do so precisely *in the context of a moral panic* when “the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people” [Cohen 2002, p. 1]. We frankly do not understand what kind of further proof would be “necessary to demonstrate that the over-representation of the threat has generated such responses.”

We hope that our clarification about the object of our analysis, which is not gendered violence and femicide but the murder of women more generally, also responds

to Professor Bertone's interesting comments. "Disproportionality" is an issue also discussed by Bertone, who finds the choice to focus upon all the murders of women that took place in 2006 a convincing one. Nonetheless, Bertone notes that this choice

needs to take account of the fact that what have been identified are the "official" victims, recognised as such by the legal system; they do not include women who have disappeared (it could be the case especially for legally and socially more invisible women like migrant sex workers) or women whose death has not been legally defined as murder, but could be considered a consequence of male violence.

There is no doubt that the forms of violence against women mentioned above could be classified as femicide, yet we deliberately decided to exclude all the unsolved cases – some of which involved sex workers and migrant women as victims – and to focus only on those where sentences had been passed as murders, in order to be able to compare reliable data and news coverage. That said, the need to "explore the structural dimensions" of violence against women is certainly shared by these authors.

References

- Cohen, S.
2002 *Folks Devils and Moral Panic*. London: Routledge.
- Downs, A.
1972 "Up and Down with Ecology: The Issue-Attention Cycle." *The Public Interest* 28: 38-50.
- Giomi, E.
2013 "Il Femminicidio nelle Relazioni Intime: Analisi Quantitativa del Fenomeno e della Sua Rappresentazione nei TG Italiani." Pp. 131-151 in *Uomini contro le donne? Le radici della violenza maschile*, edited by D. Cherubini, S. Magaraggia. Utet: Torino.
- Maneri, M.
2001 "Il Panico Morale Come Dispositivo di Trasformazione dell'Insicurezza." *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia* 1: 5-40.
- Waddington, P.A.J.
1986 "Mugging as a Moral Panic: A Question of Proportion." *British Journal of Sociology* 37: 245-259.

Moral Panic: the Issue of Women and Crime in Italian Evening News

A Reply to Comments

Abstract: Critics of the notion of “moral panic” have long affirmed that it lacks any criteria of proportionality without which it is impossible to determine whether concern about a social problem is justified or not. We think that the anti-immigrant frenzy of 2006-2007 was completely out of proportion with the “threat” of strangers to Italian women, and that the hysteria about immigrants fuelled by evening news concealed the real issue emerging at that time: extreme violence against women perpetrated by partners or ex-partners.

Keywords: Moral Panic, proportionality, gender violence, femicide, public opinion.

Elisa Giomi is Lecturer in Mass Communication Theories at the Department of Social, Political and Cognitive Sciences, University of Siena, where she completed her Ph.D in Communication, Media and the Public Sphere. She also teaches at the University of Roma Tre. She has been the scientific coordinator of two European Projects in the field of women and the media and she is member of the editorial board of “*AG-AboutGender. International Journal of Gender Studies.*”

Fabrizio Tonello is Professor of Political Science at the Department of Political Science, Law and International Relations, University of Padova. In 2011 he was Fulbright fellow at the University of Pittsburgh (Pa.). Among his recent publications: *La Politica come Azione Simbolica*, 2003; *La Fabbrica dei Mostri. Un Caso di Panico Morale negli Stati Uniti*, 2006; “Never Again? International Mass Media and African Genocide,” 2005, in Oboe, A., *Approaching SeaChanges*, Padova: Unipress; Italian edition with an *Introduction of the American Constitution*, 2011; *L'Età dell'Ignoranza*, 2012; *Elezioni*, 2013.