Decoding ‘encoding’

Moral panics, media practices and Marxist presuppositions

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Abstract

A generation ago, Hall et al.’s (1978) work *Policing the Crisis* gave a sophisticated analysis of the British media’s mundane ability to ‘encode’ events so as to help produce a moral panic about mugging. Although this work remains relatively neglected in its home country, it has begun to be utilized for empirical analysis in North America. This article suggests, however, that Hall et al.’s analysis remains a poor import. This is not, however because of its age or cultural specificity. Instead *Policing the Crisis* fails, quite simply because it repeats *in its own analysis* the same ‘ideological practices’ (albeit at a higher logical level), which it discovered in its empirical investigation of the British media.

Key Words
codification • ideology • moral panic • *Policing the Crisis* • Stuart Hall

Labouring to learn: from “subjugation”\(^1\) to “codification”

I grew up in a “working class” family in Luton,\(^2\) and was the first (and only) one in my family to go on to university. However, as the Marxism that I first encountered there in the 1970s seemed quite incapable of explaining my lived experience, I found myself drawn to the powerful writings of scholars informed by ethnomethodological insights. Convincing demonstrations of the sophistication of everyday, common sense knowledge (Drew, 1978), penetrating critiques of the official statistics on juvenile delinquency (Cicourel, 1968) and revealing
displays of the power relations hidden within seemingly factual textual materials (Smith, 1978) were among the analyses that nurtured me in this intellectual infancy. More importantly, these writings also laid the foundation for my subsequent intellectual “self-assembly” (Hofstadter, 1980: 438–558).³

Yet despite their concern with everyday experience, the early scholars in this field rarely started from or paid much attention to specifically “classed” experiences. Thus, when I came across the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS, also known as the Birmingham School) on my return to university some time later, aspects of their work were initially attractive. Although I had difficulty digesting their somewhat abstract analyses of working class youth “subcultures” (Clarke, 1976; Hebdige, 1976a, 1976b, 1979), their ethnographies (e.g. Willis, 1977; McRobbie, 1978) seemed to have at least some relevance to my own upbringing. Nevertheless, I experienced difficulties reconciling these eloquent micro-level analyses with the typical CCCS macro-theoretical reliance on a Marxism that I still found unpalatable and increasingly incapable of confronting the type of epistemological challenges—based on post-structural and post-modern developments—that were also emerging at that time.

So I continued, in my own scholarly formation, to build on my intellectual roots and attempt some type of critical analysis inspired by Smith’s early calls to connect agency and structure (Smith, 1974a, 1974b, 1981). Nonetheless, analogous to what I experienced when reading CCCS ethnographies, I also had trouble digesting Smith’s usage of Marxism (frequently, at this time, based on her reading of ‘The German Ideology’). Having also attempted without much success to discover some theoretical utility in my graduate school encounters with neo-Marxist theorizing (Marcuse, 1964; Althusser, 1971; Poulantzas, 1973, 1978; Sumner, 1979; Held, 1980; Habermas, 1981), it was only after my exposure to Foucault’s genealogical approach that I saw the potential for amalgamating my early, micro-level discourse analytic approach (Doran 1981) with something compatible at the structural level; so as to carry out more sustained empirical analysis.

In my own research, then, I started from a shared and embodied “class” experience but proceeded to trace how such a class experience became subjugated (Foucault, 1980: 81–3). After a certain amount of reflection on and struggle with the historical data, though, it appeared as if something more than just subjugation—or ‘mediation’ (Doran 1986)—was occurring. Fortunately, by using Baudrillard (1975, 1980, 1983), I was able to move beyond several limitations in Foucault’s articulation of the ‘carceral continuum’ (1977: 297), and proceed towards a realization that this historical process entailed a “codification” as much as a “subjugation” of working class voices (Doran, 1994b, 1996). The end result of this process was the creation of a simulation model of that class experience (Doran, 1994c). More recently, Donzelot’s (1984) untranslated work has also helped me obtain a more complete understanding of this historical process (Doran, 2004) as his research carries out something of a parallel analysis to Foucault’s (1977) classic. Where Foucault’s great sociological contribution

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was his documenting of what one might call the emergence of a govern-
mental discourse of the “pathological”, Donzelot traced the simultaneous 
rise of a governmental discourse of the “normal”. 

But, perhaps more than anything else, it was my personal dissatisfaction 
with my rather undertheorized notion of “codification” that drew me back 
again to the Birmingham School. As its director, Stuart Hall had been one 
of the first social analysts explicitly to articulate a concern with the empir-
ical process of “encoding” (Hall, 1973, 1980) and as Policing the Crisis 
(Hall et al., 1978) had demonstrated a sophisticated attention to questions 
of language (beginning at the micro level but going beyond this to a struc-
tural critique), I returned to the Birmingham School with the intention of 
clarifying my own understanding of “codification”. I planned to do this 
through a detailed examination of Hall’s theoretical and empirical work on 
this apparently similar concept. I hoped to find methodological assistance 
for the kind of cultural/historical analysis in which I was engaged—work 
which, however much I learned from them theoretically, figures like 
Baudrillard, Foucault and Donzelot did not concretely illuminate.

But, in going back to the CCCS material, I did not find what I was look-
ing for, although—at the same time—my search was hardly in vain. Indeed, 
I may have discovered something equally important. In the process of trac-
ing the theoretical and empirical trajectory of Hall’s work from his early the-
oretical interest in “encoding/decoding” (Hall, 1973) to his later empirical 
applications in the monograph on mugging (Hall et al., 1978), I discovered 
how to formulate explicity what I had previously understood only intu-
itively. In other words, it is only now that I have reached a certain “textual 
maturity” that I am able to articulate clearly certain problems with Hall’s 
framework both theoretically and empirically. Only now do I feel that I can 
fluently “decode” arguments made by Hall et al. about media signification.

More specifically, despite Hall et al.’s (1978) careful and systematic 
examination of how the British media “coded” events in an ideological 
fashion during the 1970s moral panic over “mugging”, Policing the Crisis 
now emerges as also guilty of acting “ideologically”. Moreover ironically, 
and unwittingly, the book can now be characterized as “ideological” in its 
own sense of that term. For, despite its enormously powerful and sugges-
tive analysis, the explanatory grid used by Hall et al. lacks a certain degree 
of self-reflection. While the most powerful features of the first half of Hall 
et al.’s work was their demonstration of the media’s everyday “ideological 
practices”, their book uses the same methods of empirical analysis that the 
authors were criticizing. Another way of putting this is as follows. Hall et 
al. are overtly concerned with empirically demonstrating how (most of) the 
media encode “problematic realities” into a dominant ideological field (albeit in a complex and taken-for-granted fashion) whose deep structure 
can be identified as “traditionalist”. Yet, when one examines Hall et al’s 
empirical practices, one finds that they, themselves, tacitly repeat those 
methods by encoding problematic events (again in a complex and taken-
for-granted fashion) into a dominant theoretical field whose deep structure
can be identified as “Marxist”. As a consequence of what in hindsight appears to be a lack of self-reflection, Hall et al. may have become caught in a “recursive loop”.

Although much more work is needed to document this recursion and the “strange loop” it tends to create, this article will take a more straightforward approach. Using a form of “textual analysis” developed by Mulkay, I will first show how Hall et al. document some of the “ideological methods” of the press. Then I will proceed to demonstrate how they repeat these very same “ideological practices” in their own analysis. But before proceeding to this argument, it is necessary to outline why my rather specific methodological-cum-theoretical interest in a research centre which had its heyday in the 1970s, and in a book first published in 1978, might still interest contemporary sociological and criminological audiences. In response to the former audience, I would cite the recent upsurge of theoretical interest in Stuart Hall’s work (especially with the publication of several books devoted to his intellectual career: see Morley and Chen, 1996; Gilroy et al., 2000; Rojek, 2003; Davis, 2004; but also Makus, 1990; Harris, 1992; Purvis and Hunt, 1993; Brooker, 1998; Wood, 1998; Tudor, 1999: 114–30). This suggests that despite Hall’s own movement away from issues of encoding and decoding, it may now be time to return to these so as to facilitate a radical renewal of his original project. In response to the latter audience, this article may serve as a cautionary warning to critical criminologists, especially North American ones, about the dangers of uncritically importing Hall et al.’s work as a theoretical resource. This is because, as the next section tries to demonstrate, US and Canadian critical criminologists are becoming increasingly interested in the general phenomenon of “moral panics” and in the specific work of the CCCS on this topic, particularly *Policing the Crisis*.

“Moral panics” in the North American context: the emerging influence of *Policing the Crisis*

Although Stuart Hall’s status as a major sociology and cultural studies theorist has been increasingly if belatedly recognized over the last decade or so, it is his conceptual understanding of “moral panics” that is, arguably, his most important contribution to the sociology of deviance and to critical criminology. While the concept of the ‘moral panic’ (Young, 1971a; Cohen, 1972) was relatively neglected in the decades after its emergence in 1970s Britain, growing evidence suggests that its theoretical utility has re-emerged there (Jenkins, 1992; Sparks, 1992; Williams, 1993; Husbands, 1994; Sumner, 1994: 269–72; Hunt, 1997; Thompson, 1998; Kitzinger, 1999; Cohen, 2002; Critcher, 2002; Drury, 2002; Hill, 2002; Ost, 2002; Valier, 2002; but see also McRobbie and Thornton, 1995; Cottie, 2002; Donson et al., 2004). In addition, scholars in North America are also starting to find the concept increasingly useful for their empirical analyses. While many of these
North American scholars are content simply to use the understanding of “moral panic” popularized by Cohen, others are beginning to use the relatively more sophisticated (if criticized) version articulated in the CCCS’s work, most notably in Policing the Crisis (Sumner, 1981; Waddington, 1986; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994; Hartley, 1996; but see also Jones, 1997; Stabile, 2001). But, whichever version is used, it seems clear that more attention has recently been paid to the social phenomenon of moral panics and accompanying media practices.14

On the one hand, North American authors primarily influenced by Cohen’s work are not hard to find. Whether they be writers of texts (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994), reviewers (Cauthen and Jasper, 1994; Goode, 2000), empirical researchers (deYoung, 1998: 257; Jenkins, 1998; Burns and Crawford, 1999; Welch, 2000; van den Hoonard, 2001: 25; Cornwell and Linders, 2002: 309; St Cyr, 2003; Lombardo, 2004; Rothe and Muzzatti, 2004; Zgoba, 2004; Welch and Schuster, 2005) or simply authors using the formulation without any explicit acknowledgement (Fekete, 1994; Aitken, 2001), analyses of and about the social construction of “moral panics” have become more prevalent. On the other hand, some authors have pushed this concept in a more critical direction. Thus, a small but increasing number of North American critical criminologists have begun relating “moral panics” about crime (initially “youth crime”) to larger structural forces.

In the USA, a couple of first generation critical criminologists (Chambliss, 1994, 1995, 2000; Platt, 1996; but also see Zatz, 1987) started this trend with their concerns about increasingly high levels of African American imprisonment and related police harassment in urban areas. Other scholars have pursued a similar theoretical trajectory in other empirical fields, for example drugs and violence (Chiricos, 1996), presidential rhetoric (Hawdon, 2001), crime expertise (Welch et al., 1997, 1998) and wilding (Welch et al., 2002). But perhaps the most explicit US usage of Hall et al.’s work appears in Macek’s (2006) recent book-length study on the modern “urban underclass” wherein he intentionally employs Hall et al.’s theoretical framework to analyse critically contemporary media.15

In Canada, there has been a similar increase in interest. While first-generation critical criminologists attempted to utilize some of the “structural” insights put forward by Hall et al. (Ratner and McMullan, 1985; see also, McMullan and Ratner, 1982; Ratner, 1985), more recently efforts have been made to analyse the media’s role in the production of moral panics. Moreover, although the academic utility of the concept of moral panic can be found in a number of Canadian works (McCormick, 1995; Barron, 2000: 21–2; Alvi, 2002: 193; Jiwani, 2002: 75–6; Wortley, 2002: 66–73), it is Schissel, arguably, who has done the most to bring Hall et al.’s specific concern with the media to the attention of Canadian criminological scholars. For the last decade or so Schissel (1997a, 1997b, 2006) has been relying on Hall et al.’s insights both to theorize the relationship between ‘moral panics and power’ (2006: 16)16 and to document how the media are portraying contemporary Canadian youth as “folk devils”.

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Yet, in both Canada and the USA, the attempt to utilize Hall et al.’s work to analyse the media is seriously jeopardized by an inability to appreciate fully the theoretical and empirical sophistication of this project, especially the relevance of Hall’s prior theorizing on encoding (and decoding). Thus, turning to *Policing the Crisis* more specifically, the next section endeavours to provide an (unavoidably selective) appreciation of the encoding process and how it operated in the press’s initial reports on ‘muggings’. Then, in the following section, I turn to a criticism of Hall et al.’s work for being itself—rather ironically and unwittingly—“ideological”.

**Media practices in the Birmingham context: articulating and developing the “encoding” process**

As suggested earlier, I had returned to the CCCS corpus hoping to obtain clarification for my own interest in “codification”. In so doing, I focused on *Policing the Crisis* as an empirical exemplar of Hall’s (1973) theoretical approach to questions of encoding. But it was only when I seriously scrutinized the entire model and its development in the years 1972–77—paying attention to both its structuralist-semiotic “encoding” and its Gramscian “decoding” aspects—that the full sophistication of this work became apparent to me. In other words, Hall’s (1973) “encoding/decoding” paper not only introduced a radical alternative to the dominant behavioural approach of that time but hinted at powerful insights to be gained by utilizing the semiotics of Barthes, the structuralism of Althusser and Gramsci’s writings on “consent” and “hegemony”. While I will not discuss the decoding aspects of the model here, I will show how Hall developed his thoughts on encoding before illustrating how some of these revised and refined insights were applied in *Policing the Crisis*.

Beginning with his 1972 discussion of the process through which the media actually ‘communicates meaning’ (1972: 53), Hall started to develop his discourse-analytic approach through the introduction of semiotic insights. Although he introduced the fundamental “codes” of denotation and connotation to show how this process of signification works, his main concern was with showing how these codes linked up with ideology. Following Barthes’ earlier claim that ideology constitutes “the process through which the bourgeoisie transforms the reality of the world into an image of the world, History into Nature” (1957: 229), Hall went on to show how news photos routinely transform that which is historical into that which appears “natural”: they typically ‘repress their ideological dimensions by offering themselves as literal visual-transcriptions of the “real world”’ (1972: 84). Of course, what is hidden by this “naturalization” are the social practices which actually constituted the photo; in Hall’s words,

> the choice of this moment of an event as against that, of this person rather than that, of this angle rather than any other, indeed the selection of this
photographed incident to represent a whole complex chain of events and meanings.

(1972: 84)

But it is not just the semiotic aspects of the “news photo” that interested Hall. Following Althusser, he introduced a structuralist perspective as well. For Althusser had claimed both that ideology should be understood as a system of representations imposed on individuals and as functioning to ‘constitute concrete individuals as subjects’ (1971: 171). For Hall, this resulted in a now familiar-sounding analysis. For example, history is frequently portrayed in terms of the actions of great individuals; that is, the ‘personal subject as exclusively the motor force of history’ (1972: 78).19 But Hall’s main point was that ‘photos play a crucial role in this … personification’ (1972: 78). In fact, contemporary newspapers take this ideological structure for granted, as Hall demonstrated when he examined how a typical “political” news story, of that time, was portrayed in the press. Although each of the papers “inflected”20 the story slightly differently (based on their different news personalities), and each of them “ideologically closed”21 down the story slightly differently, they all stayed within ‘the ideology of personalisation’ (1972: 73). Another way of putting this is that it was taken for granted that the stories would be constructed around a person (in this case, a male politician) and his accompanying photo (in this case, the same photo was used in almost all the stories).

A year later, Hall formally articulated his encoding/decoding model of the media22 and clarified his understanding of the denotative and connotative levels involved. For him, although the denotative level appears “literal” we must always remember that it works through processes like “naturalization” with the result that “naturalised codes” (e.g. news photos) conceal the ‘practices of coding which are present’ (1980: 132) within them. Yet, even though there is no longer as clear a distinction between the two levels as there was for the early semioticians (both levels are “ideological” for Hall), he still believes that they need to be differentiated:

The so-called denotative level of the televisual sign is fixed by certain, very complex (but limited or ‘closed’) codes. But its connotative level, though also bounded is more open, subject to more active transformations which exploit its polysemic values. Any such already constituted sign is potentially transformable into more than one connotative configuration.

(1980: 134)

Thus the denotative level is characterized by ‘apparently “natural” recognitions’ (1980: 132) wherein the ‘ideological value is strongly fixed because it has become so fully universal and “natural”’ (1980: 133).

But the connotative level may operate slightly differently. This is especially the case when “troubling events” occur; these must be ‘assigned to their discursive domains before they can be said to “make sense”’ (1980: 134). Moreover, ‘the most common way of “mapping” them is to assign the new to some domain or other of the existing “maps of problematic social
reality” (1980: 134). But it is crucial for Hall that we do not see this in terms of a simple plurality of maps. Instead these are, hierarchically structured, ‘different areas of social life appear to be mapped out into discursive domains hierarchically organised into dominant or preferred meanings’ (1980: 134). Equally important, because ‘it is always possible to order, classify, assign and decode an event within more than one “mapping”’ (1980: 134), Hall further insisted that this “classifying work” was never automatic. As he goes on to clarify. Alluding specifically to television:

...since these mappings are 'structured in dominance’ but not closed, the communicative process consists not in the unproblematic assignment of every visual item to its given position within a set of prearranged codes, but of performative rules—rules of competence and use, of logics in use—which seek actively to enforce or pre-fer (sic) one semantic domain over another and rule items into and out of their appropriate meaning sets.

(1980: 134)

In other words, Hall is also drawing attention to the “interpretative” work common at this connotative level; in contrast to the “identification” work more characteristic at the denotative level.

But Hall was not just developing these “semiotic” aspects of his analysis. His aim was to combine the semiotic and the structural, a goal he further developed in a 1975 paper. Firmly eschewing any conspiratorial understanding of the media, Hall nicely illustrated how mundane journalistic ‘requirements of “objectivity”, “balance”, “impartiality” etc’ (1975: 129) operate to help reproduce ‘the framework of power … a political and social system which is “structured in dominance”’ (1975: 129). For example, he argues that in their concern for “balance”, the media routinely access the powerful (e.g. government spokespersons) as well as accepted “oppositional viewpoints” (e.g. the parliamentary opposition) when they report on ‘what is happening’ (1975: 125) in the world. Moreover, this concern with balance is displayed throughout the entire encoding process, not just at this ‘primary signification’ (1975: 123) stage. As Hall explains it,

If the media can be said to shape the public debate, to mould popular consciousness about issues, it is not only because they have become the major and most credible source of literal information about the world. It is because they also exercise the function of connecting discrete events with one another: they build or ‘map’ events into larger, wider frameworks of meaning so that viewers come, not simply to ‘know what is happening’, but to construct from that knowledge ‘pictures of the world’, scenarios of action.

(1975: 126)

But when the media engage in this second phase, the same structure of debate typically gets continued. In other words, this “balanced” coverage occurs both in the initial “signification” of the news and in subsequent “reflections” on the story. For example, in “current affairs” programmes...
and documentaries where the media’s task is not so much to simply “report” the news but to “reflect” on it and place it in some type of context for the audience (e.g. ‘giving more detailed, expert, “background” accounts or arguing and contesting the meaning and significance of the events which the news has reported’, 1975: 124), we often see those earlier concerns with balance and so on repeated here (1975: 132–8). But, crucially, viewpoints and ideas which do not fit this “structured controversy” have real difficulty being taken seriously or even being heard (1975: 138–40). The end result, as Hall says, is that ‘the media serve to reproduce the hegemonic definitions, together with their contradictions’ (1975: 143) albeit unintentionally.

Hall’s focus, however, is not just on these media “encoding” practices in isolation. Thus, in 1977, he attempts to situate them in a general discussion of how a “dominant ideology” works to ensure its dominance, or its “hegemony” throughout society. Following Gramsci, Hall argues that ‘in part, “hegemony” is achieved by the containment of the subordinate classes within the “superstructures”’ (1977: 332). But the way in which this works is crucially important.

As Hall writes:

This operates not because the dominant classes can prescribe and proscribe, in detail, the mental content of the lives of subordinate classes (they too ‘live’ in their own ideologies), but because they strive and to a degree succeed in framing all competing definitions of reality within their range, bringing all alternatives within their horizon of thought. They set the limits—mental and structural—within which subordinate classes ‘live’ and make sense of their subordination in such a way as to sustain the dominance of those ruling over them.

(1977: 333)

With regard to this complex work of “containing” and “setting limits”, the media play a limited but crucial role. Specifically, their work in the general field of politics consists of three complex ideological functions, ones concerned with reporting, reflecting and orchestrating. The first two (obviously building on the earlier 1972, 1973, 1974 and 1975 articles) attempt constantly to “encode” events, albeit in a complex fashion, within the range of the dominant ideological field, while the third attempts to win the consent of its readers, to shape its audience’s “decodings” so that subordinate classes do, in fact, remain “contained” within a hegemonic structure.

While this media work is constantly taking place, for Hall, it is especially critical at ‘crisis moments’ (1974: 298). Moreover, such times are tremendously illuminating for students of ideologies because ‘we are in a special position to observe the work of persuasive definition in the course of its formation’ (1974: 298). Thus, Hall et al.’s (1978) project actually attempts to document this ideological work of the media, as it is being created and formed during a period of crisis. Thus, the first five chapters of the book show how the media report a “troubling event”, how they reflect on it and then how they try to orchestrate the audience so as to help win consent for
their “preferred reading” of this event (in this case, as a series of muggings suggesting the strong need for a public debate in support of heavier sentencing).

Although Hall et al. never do show the entirety of this sophisticated process, the beauty of their analysis is the detailed attention they pay to the empirical specifics of these practices in the first half of their book—to the “how” of the encoding/decoding process in the print media. We can examine only one of these practices here (the initial reporting): nonetheless, it provides us with a detailed insight into one of the ideological functions of the media identified earlier. The analysis of the other ideological functions, the reflecting on the initial story (which helps “make sense” of and “explain” the initial encoding) and the subsequent orchestrating of consent (which helps shape the “decoding” practices of the audience) must be reserved for another occasion.

**Signifying “troubling events” in the press**

From the outset, Hall et al. use both structuralist and semiotic insights to inform their analysis of the press. Thus, for them, ‘making an event intelligible’ (1978: 55) as a news item is a social process (of “signifying”), one which demands analysis. It depends upon the utilization of ‘professional media ideologies’ (1978: 57) and the use of pre-existing ‘maps of meaning’ (1978: 54) that allow journalists to identify and recognize newsworthy events so that they can mundanely place troubling events within a dominant discursive domain. Crucially, for contemporary journalists, their “map” typically assumes that society is organized around the notion of ‘consensus’ (1978: 55). Then Hall et al. turn to the routine structural constraints on journalists such as the need for getting a paper out on a regular basis and professional demands of impartiality, balance and objectivity (1978: 57) and their consequences. One such effect is journalists’ heavy reliance on ‘accredited representatives’ (1978: 58) like MPs, employers, trade union leaders and experts. These are easy to get hold of, journalists believe, and provide the supposedly “factual” viewpoints that newspapers need but which journalists cannot provide, for fear of being seen as “biased”. But the crucial point for Hall et al. is that the media routinely access these “opinions of the powerful”; moreover, these representatives have become the “primary definers” on most issues because they ‘are understood to have access to more accurate or more specialized information on particular topics than the majority of the population’ (1978: 58).

And although ‘counter-definitions’ (1978: 64) routinely get heard because of the journalistic concern with “balance” (e.g. trade-union views are routinely heard alongside those of employers (1978: 64–5)), this still results in the issue being understood only within the structural limits of what Hall earlier called ‘the hegemonic definitions, together with their contradictions’ (1975: 143). This occurs for several reasons. On the one hand, opposition voices (like trade unions) must have won a certain ‘legitimacy’
(1978: 64) and be prepared to be ‘reasonable’ (1978: 64) before they are routinely consulted on matters such as these. When they are consulted, they must respond ‘in terms pre-established by the primary definers’ (1978: 64). On the other hand, ‘many emergent counter-definers … have no access to the defining process at all’ (1978: 64). In fact, frequently such groups may be ‘regularly and systematically stigmatized in their absence, as “extreme”, their actions systematically de-authenticated by being labelled as “irrational”’ (1978: 64). Nevertheless, the end result is similar: the media debate stays within a narrow range.

With crime issues, these limits are narrower than for other social problems. Whereas employers’ views are routinely balanced with the quite different, and opposing, views of the trade unions, crime issues are typically contained within the realm of the ‘pragmatic’ (1978: 69). In part, this is because the primary definer on the issue almost invariably comes from the control culture:

what is most striking about crime news is that it very rarely involves a first-hand account of the crime itself, unlike the ‘eye-witness’ report from the battlefront of the war correspondent. Crime stories are almost wholly produced from the definitions and perspectives of the institutional primary definers. (1978: 68)

As a result, the debate on crime is much more narrowly circumscribed than on other issues: ‘a police statement on crime is rarely “balanced” by one from a professional criminal, though the latter probably possesses more expertise on crime’ (1978: 69). Moreover, any organized opposition (e.g. a reform group of some type) which does get consulted typically shares ‘the same basic definition of the “problem” as the primary definers, and is concerned merely to propound alternative means to the same objective: the returning of the criminal to the fold’ (1978: 69). Yet here again the “structure of power” does not get reproduced in a balanced fashion; rather, reproduction is ‘structured in dominance’ (Hall, 1975: 129). To illuminate what such a phrase actually means at this level, we must look more closely at the specifics of the primary definers’ work. Not only does this person routinely come from the “control culture” but s/he gives the ‘primary interpretation’ (1978: 58). For Hall et al., this is not only the first interpretation but one that commands the field, with other viewpoints having to respond, in some way, to this initial interpretation. Most importantly, it is discursively powerful; ‘this initial interpretative framework-what Lang and Lang have called an “inferential structure”-is extremely difficult to alter fundamentally, once established’ (1978: 58–9).

But Hall et al. insist that the media are not passive recipients of these viewpoints nor simple reproducers; it must always be remembered that journalists, not primary definers, construct news stories. Consequently, when Hall et al. turn to this more active role of the press, they immediately draw our attention to perhaps the most important (but most overlooked) tacit and taken-for-granted journalistic practice: ‘identification and contextualization’
This mundane practice is a critical one in their analysis because it illustrates Hall’s (1972, 1973) earlier work on how ideology works through the techniques of denotation and, in particular, connotation. We have already seen how “signifying” entails a journalist identifying what is newsworthy. But this process also, unavoidably, involves a journalist “contextualizing” it. As Hall et al. clarify, events ‘must be identified (i.e., named, defined, related to other events known to the audience) and assigned to a social context (i.e., placed within a frame of meanings familiar to the audience)’ (1978: 54). It is through this tacit process that the world does not get represented as ‘a jumble of random and chaotic events’ (1978: 54) but, instead, gets “made intelligible”. But, as Hall et al. will go on to demonstrate, how this is accomplished is hugely consequential as it sets up all the possible directions for future development of the story (e.g. in editorials, features, current affairs programmes, documentaries and so on).

This is only one part of the “active” work of the press however. Although the press typically starts from the understandings of the “primary definers”, we routinely find journalists actively selecting (1978: 60) and transforming (1978: 60) these viewpoints. In particular, events are “coded” in each paper’s own mode of address and into its ‘public idiom’ (1978: 61), that is, the language it shares with its assumed audience. There may be significant variations between how different papers report the news since each newspaper “inflects” the news story slightly differently. But, for Hall et al., their general argument still pertains: these variations do not constitute a ‘vast pluralistic range of voices’ (1978: 61) but instead operate within ‘distinct ideological limits’ (1978: 61). In this specific case, the limits are the ‘broad spectrum of “reasonable men” (sic)’ (1978: 61).

Perhaps most crucial for Hall et al. is that this process “translates” official viewpoints into the public idiom, thus investing them ‘with popular force and resonance’ (1978: 61) and “naturalizing” these views for that audience. For example, a presentation of an annual police report was translated into the headline—“Aggro Britain” (1978: 61)—by one newspaper. The result of this process is both that this staid report was transposed into the popular imagery of the audience and that it had a ‘reality-confirming effect’ (1978: 62). This is because the ‘publicising of an issue in the media can give it more “objective” status as a real (valid) issue of public concern’ (1978: 62). Finally, the process helps to close the ideological circle of ordinary people now speaking within the framework of the dominant ideologies; it becomes, their ‘taken-for-granted reality’ (1978: 62).

Yet the real utility of Hall et al.’s analysis is that they show these practices specifically, and empirically, with regard to one particular case study: the Handsworth mugging incident. First, the “mapping process” seemed to indicate that all the media shared the same “consensual” assumption about what was “newsworthy” about this story. In other words, the event was signified by all the newspapers in the same way; ‘by means of the same contrasting or juxtaposed themes: the youth of the offenders versus the length of the sentences’ (1978: 84). Moreover, the general media practice by which
the addition of news photos helps “naturalise” and personalize an event was also present here so that ‘the individualizing of the abstract issues’ (1978: 85) surrounding this event was successfully accomplished. The media’s reliance on “primary definers” also comes through clearly here because the story comes directly from the courtroom (1978: 84) with the ‘report of the court hearing … judge’s comments … the prosecution case … pleas in mitigation’ (1978: 85) being covered by most newspapers. In fact, the event did not even become a story for the media until the control culture had constructed it as such (1978: 84).

We also see counter-ideologies (from groups like ‘the National Council for Civil Liberties and the Howard league for Penal Reform’ (1978: 85)) included in the “balanced” coverage between ‘penal reformers’ (1978: 85) and ‘law enforcers’ (1978: 85), and concerns with objectivity and impartiality also dominant. In fact, Hall et al. nicely illustrate how two papers with quite different personalities (the Daily Telegraph and the Daily Mirror) cover this story in an impeccably “balanced” and “objective” fashion (1978: 86–8) while at the same time “inflecting” the story in line with their different audiences (the Telegraph towards the “legalistic”, the Mirror towards the “personal”, (1978: 87)) and never crossing ‘the agreed boundaries of news exploration’ (1978: 86). What is also crucial here, as Hall had earlier anticipated, is that the “primary interpretation” commands the field. The issue continues to be treated as a “penal or judicial” one—an issue about sentencing and penal policy primarily—and this, of course, came from the concerns of the “primary definers” in the courtroom (1978: 84).28

But the more active role of the press is also visible, especially in terms of what Hall had earlier identified as “identification and contextualization”. ‘The “creative” role of the media’ (1978: 84) is perhaps most strongly demonstrated here by its identification of the event in terms of the words “muggers” and “muggings”. For even though such terms were probably ‘not used in court’ (1978: 84),29 their usage here for “identifying” what had happened is consequential. In fact, it is this “identification” (typically underpinned by the official statistics on the recent rise in muggings (1978: 8, 86)) which sets up a quite specific context for how the issue is to be understood, developed, debated and so on in the future. Because even though Hall et al. had already shown, earlier in their book, that the crime of “mugging” was very difficult to distinguish from that of “garrotting” or “rolling” (1978: 3–6), that it had no legal existence (1978: 5) and that the “mugging” statistics produced were quite misleading (1978: 10–16), the term itself was used, by these newspapers, not only to “identify” something as “factual” but also to “contextualize” it within a referential context of ‘American panic about race, crime, riot and lawlessness’ (1978: 28). In other words, the term ‘delivered something like a whole image of “mugging” to the English reader’ (1978: 23).

To understand why this is the case, Hall et al. remind us of the “social history” of this label. For them, the label “mugging” assumed its present meaning in 1940s America. Quoting Lejeune and Alex, Hall et al. state that ‘it refers to a certain manner of robbing and/or beating of a victim by petty
professional operators or thieves who often work in touring packs of three or more’ (1978: 19). But by the 1960s, the term in the USA was now mobilizing a wider referential context—‘it had become a central symbol for the many tensions and problems besetting American social and political life in general’ (1978: 19). And it was in this form that it was first imported into the UK. That is, when the British press first started using the term “mugging” in the late 1960s, it meant something like ‘general social crisis and rising crime’ (1978: 23), but in the early 1970s, the British media “naturalized” it so that it could now be specifically applied, in a literal fashion, to crimes occurring within their territorial boundaries.

But this new “identification” of old crimes as “muggings” also operated simultaneously to “contextualize” those crimes within this quite different framework:

British ‘mugging’ had no career as a descriptive term referring to a version of street robbery with which, in any event, most British cities have long been familiar. The label had no unsensational origins in Britain. It was a complex, social theme from its inception. It arrived in Britain already established in its most sensational and sensationalized form. (1978: 28)

Thus, when the specific newspapers in the Handsworth case “identified and contextualized” this troubling event through their use of the label “mugging”, they were simultaneously mobilizing a ‘whole referential context with all its associated meanings’ (1978: 19). And as this specific form of “identification and contextualization” became widespread in the media, it meant, according to Hall et al., that ‘Britain, adopted, not only “mugging”, but the fear and panic about “mugging”’ (1978: 28), which had been earlier associated with its usage in the USA.

The end result of all this, for Hall et al., was that what was new in Britain was not so much the crime of mugging, but rather the label (mugging) and ‘the ideological frame which it laid across the field of social vision’ (1978: 29). In other words, this empirical example of the tacit, taken-for-granted linking up of “mugging” with this particular “referential context” nicely illustrates Hall’s (1972, 1973) earlier theoretical work on the ideological nature of “connotation”; whereby “troubling events” get routinely “mapped” into one of the hierarchically organized discursive or ‘connotational domains’ (1973: 13). Moreover, this association gets formulated “naturally”; thereby simultaneously demonstrating the “naturalization” process that Barthes had first identified as constitutive of “ideology”.

Marxist presuppositions in the analytic context: decoding the initial “encoding”

So now having outlined the general theoretical features of the “encoding process”, and having also documented certain of its first phase’s empirical
features, it is now possible to examine Hall et al.’s project, in much the same way that they examined the press. Via such a process, I hope to demonstrate, albeit briefly and rather sketchily, the main ways in which their own, tacit, taken-for-granted, methodological practices repeat these ideological practices of the media; albeit at a higher logical level.

**Signifying “troubling events” in Hall et al.**

Like the media, Hall et al. start with a tacit map (of problematic social reality). But for them this is organized around class conflict (1978: 57, 59), not consensus. Moreover, they, too, are under structural constraints because of their profession. Like journalism, the scientific disciplines also impose certain structural imperatives on how scientists and social scientists carry out their everyday work. As a result, Hall et al., like journalists, are under pressure to publish (1978: ix), and they are also concerned with impartiality, balance and objectivity (in fact, in this study, they explicitly worry about being seen as ‘biased’ (1978: ix), ‘unbalanced’ (1978: ix), etc.). Furthermore, just as the press journalists relied on “accredited representatives” in the field, with the result that the “primary interpretations” of these “primary definers” commanded the field, we see Hall et al. beginning their analysis by relying on “accredited representatives”. But with Hall et al., it is not the judges (or other members of the control culture) who act as primary definers; rather it is the actual newspapers themselves. That is, Hall et al.’s “accredited representatives” are textual in nature. And just as the typical press coverage on crime ‘very rarely involves a first-hand account of the crime itself’ (1978: 68), Hall et al.’s coverage suffers from the same reliance on ‘institutional primary definers’ (1978: 68). In other words, it is the press’s coverage that provides Hall et al. with the primary interpretation of these “troubling events”—that they constitute ‘the “mugging” problem’ (1978: viii). And, just as the primary interpretation commanded the field in the press’s coverage (that the issue was a sentencing one), this interpretation (that the issue is a mugging one) also commands the field in Hall et al.’s subsequent analysis.

Furthermore, just as Hall et al. studied the contributions of ‘counter-definers’ (1978: 64) when they studied the press, we can also see how Hall et al., in their own practices, provide for the viewpoints of counter-definers to be heard. So just as Hall et al. had argued that typically, in press coverage, the views of employers are “balanced” by the views of trade union representatives, and that the views of law enforcers were “balanced” by the perspectives of the penal reformers (1978: 85), Hall et al. also provide oppositional perspectives on these “muggings”. And once again these are textual in nature, but here the balance comes from the opposition between the media’s perspective and that of the text (rather than the opinion) of ‘the expert’ (1978: 58). First Hall et al. depend on the Marxist expertise of Althusser (1971) and Lukes (1975) to show the way ideology operates through the ‘ceremonial ritual’ (1978: 31) of the judiciary with regard to
these troubling events; then they rely on “labelling theory” expertise (e.g. Becker, 1963; Wilkins, 1964; Young, 1971a, 1971b) to display the role of the police as amplifiers (1978: 38–52). But just as the counter-definers in the press shared the ‘same basic definition of the “problem” as the primary definers’ (1978: 69), we see these counter-definers holding assumptions similar to those of the primary definers. So just as the press was interested in finding an “explanation” for these muggings (in terms of their concern with the background factors producing individual “muggers”), the expertise consulted here seeks an “explanation” in terms of the “social reaction” to such events. But as a consequence, the debate is contained within certain limits. For example, alternative “emergent counter-definers” such as social scientific texts that seek to “explicate” rather than “explain” social phenomena are not accessed at all in Hall et al.’s analysis.32

Furthermore, just as the newspapers did not just repeat the views of primary definers but actively transformed them—we see Hall et al. doing something similar. They, too, actively construct their story. Moreover, here we see the crucial importance (for the subsequent development of the analysis), of how they “identify and contextualize” the issue. That is, they identify the issue as one of a “mugging moral panic” and they simultaneously contextualize it within a quite different framework of meaning. So just as the press “identified” the issue as “mugging” (even though the primary definers had not), and simultaneously contextualized it within the “ideological frame” of “fear and panic about mugging”; Hall et al. identify the issue as a “mugging moral panic” (even though the primary definers had not) and simultaneously contextualize it within the theoretical frame of social (over-)reaction which occurs when ‘the official reaction to a person, groups of persons or series of events is out of all proportion to the actual threat offered’ (1978: 16).33

Moreover, when we examine their primary rationale for “identifying” this troubling event as a “mugging moral panic” we find their reasoning as problematic as the media’s. That is, they first re-examine the “official statistics” and conclude that ‘the statistics such as we have do not support the “rising crime rate” equation’ (1978: 13). Then they ask themselves ‘if the reaction to mugging cannot be explained by a straightforward reference to the statistics, how can it be explained?’ (1978: 16). And their answer is that this social reaction constitutes a moral panic. Yet such a form of argumentation misses a more fundamental and crucial point. By remaining within the limits of traditional social scientific concerns with the accuracy or otherwise of these statistics, Hall et al. not only missed the underlying reliance of such enterprises on the “common sense reasoning” of their practitioners (Kitsuse and Cicourel, 1963; Cicourel, 1964; Atkinson, 1971), but they also missed the practices of coding (Garfinkel, 1967; Cicourel, 1968) and disqualification (Smith, 1974b, 1974c, 1975) inherent within the production of such “official statistics”.34

But this active work of Hall et al. is not just confined to how they “identify and contextualize” the issue. Just as Hall et al. traced this more active
work of the press, in terms of how they encoded “muggings” into their own “public idiom” (the manner in which newspapers usually talk to their audience) we can see that Hall et al. carry out something similar in their work; they encode this “moral panic” into the theoretical idiom of the Marxist paradigm. So whereas the first two chapters “identify and contextualize” it as an ‘ideological displacement’ (1978: 29), chapters three to five “inflect” it in such a way that it translates moral panic analysis into the ‘common stock of knowledge’ (1978: 61) of its presumed readership. That is, they make it intelligible within a Marxist framework. Specifically, chapter three encodes the activities of the press within the conceptual understanding of an ‘ideological state-apparatus’ (1978: 76) put forward by Althusser (1971), while chapter four suggests that the “balanced” press coverage of Handsworth, may also be illuminated by Barthes’ (1957) early discussion of bourgeois ideology and how bourgeois myth operates through rhetorical forms such as the ‘Neither-Norism’ (1978: 106) found in this coverage. Chapter five’s analysis of the published letters, illustrates the Gramscian (1971) concern with winning the consent of subordinate classes for these dominant interpretations, as the media attempts, here, to ‘organise and orchestrate the debate about public questions’ (1978: 121). Finally, at the end of chapter five, Hall et al. discover an emerging form of lay, experiential public opinion (mobilized by these events but little influenced by the media) which gets expressed in private, not public letters; and Hall et al. place this within the Marxist frame of the ‘authoritarian personality’ (1978: 133) suggested by certain members of the Frankfurt school—Adorno et al. (1950), Fromm (1960) and Reich (1975).

One major result of all this work, then, is that just as the press was able to “translate” the views of primary definers into the popular imagery of their audience, we may see something similar occurring here. That is, Hall et al.’s work translates these troubling events into the theoretical imagery known to its audience. So just as the title ‘Aggro Britain’ (1978: 61) translated the views of the primary definers into the popular imagery of the Daily Mirror’s readership, we can see here how the title Policing the Crisis, (along with its subtitle Mugging, the State and Law and Order) succinctly translates this discussion of moral panics into the Marxist vocabulary, of “crises” and the “State”, etc., familiar to its intended audience.

Conclusion

Despite my initial attempts at presenting the whole of my argument (on the media practices of reflecting and orchestrating, not just reporting) within the confines of one article, I eventually realized that to do justice to such an endeavour would require much more space than is customary in a typical scholarly article. Thus, I have had to restrict myself, here, to presenting only the first phase of this argument. Nevertheless, I hope that its main points are clear. Whereas, Hall et al. showed the ideological practices of the press
with regard to their primary signification of certain “troubling events” as “muggings”; I have shown that Hall et al. repeat these ideological practices, albeit at a higher logical level, through their primary signification of these events as a “mugging moral panic”. My demonstration of how they repeat other aspects of the encoding/decoding process, namely the “reflecting” and the “orchestrating” phases, will have to be reserved for another occasion.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to make a few general comments on the implications of this article. First, the article not only acts as a warning to North American critical criminologists to be wary of using Hall et al. uncritically, but it also suggests the need for analysts to start studying this importing and exporting of “labels” and “referential contexts” between different cultures. Second, my struggles with the writing of this article have also contributed to my own intellectual growth. On the one hand, I have discovered a new-found regard for the sophistication which Hall and his students brought to the analysis of “mugging”; on the other hand, I believe my analysis has shown the need to go beyond both Hall’s theoretical formulation and Hall et al.’s empirical application of this phase of the “encoding” process. In other words, although Hall’s work constitutes a sophisticated theoretical formulation of the issues of “encoding/decoding” and although Hall et al.’s empirical work acted as an equally sophisticated (albeit tacit) application of that model, my specific remarks here suggest that we must go even further than Hall et al. themselves did. And such a task might begin in one area, in particular. That is, we might try to go beyond the “encoding” practices carried out by the media and examine them in more mundane realms; for example in fields like the one missed by Hall et al.—that of the ‘official statistics’.

Notes

This is an extensively revised and re-written version of a paper initially presented at the British Sociology Association’s annual meetings, York, April 2000. I would like to thank the participants at that session for their helpful comments, as well as this journal’s three anonymous reviewers and, especially, the editor, Lynn Chancer. The article has benefited tremendously from their input. As always, the shortcomings of the article are my own.

1. I use double quotation marks here and elsewhere when I wish to draw attention to a word or phrase in the analysis.
2. At least we were labelled “working class” by the British sociologists who had studied Lutonian families like ours in the England of the 1960s (Goldthorpe et al., 1968a, 1968b, 1969).
3. While at the University of York, I was primarily attracted to the teachings of Paul Drew (e.g. Drew, 1978; Atkinson and Drew, 1979) and Tony Wootton (Wootton, 1975). Their persuasive demonstrations of the fact that analysis must begin from one’s own cultural experience, and that the ‘the only way of knowing a socially constructed world is knowing it from within’ (Smith, 1974a:
11; cf. Turner, 1974: 204–5) were powerful influences on me from my earliest undergraduate days. Consequently, this self-reflective, reflexive awareness has allowed me to examine extensively the social world as an accomplishment, and to theorize the “self” (including my own) as an accomplishment as well (Doran, 1990). In fact, Garfinkel’s (1967) demonstration of Agnes’s “self-construction” alerted me to this latter issue well before more celebrated thinkers on the subject (e.g. Foucault, 1988) started exploring the practices and “technologies of the ‘self’” in their own work.

4. Although I also had hopes that this return to the CCCS might benefit my teaching career as well. That is, like many other students of my generation who have ended up with teaching careers quite divorced from their areas of research expertise, my return to the Birmingham School offered me the promise of linking together, in a relatively sophisticated fashion, my long-standing research interests (discourse analysis, social theory, genealogical analysis) with my undergraduate teaching responsibilities (in criminal justice and criminology).

5. Baudrillard and Donzelot have rarely spoken explicitly about their methods, while Foucault’s discussions are rather scattered (see Kendall and Wickham, 1999: 151–3 for a partial list of Foucault’s own discussions of “method”, as well as discussions by others on Foucault’s method). Owen (1995) also suggests some interesting methodological considerations for any researcher concerned with genealogical research.

6. Although proposed in a quite different context, Smith has expressed a similar aim in her own work—‘I have had to find out how to make explicit much that I just knew’ (1999: 4, italics in original). Nevertheless, there remain significant differences between our apparently similar concerns. My concern is mainly with issues that I had first encountered in my intellectual “socialization”; Smith’s concern is more to do with issues that have been raised in her role as a teacher of feminist sociology (Smith, 1999: 4).

7. Via such a claim, this allows me to bracket the thorny “intellectual” problem of what exactly is constitutive of “ideology”. Instead, I am more interested in “how” the term operates within a discourse.

8. The problem of “self-reflection”, despite its marginality in criminological theorizing has received extended analysis in other fields. In sociology, its pioneers were scholars like Blum and McHugh, and their corpus still provides one of the most extensive and sustained investigations into this phenomenon in the social sciences. For examples of their specific style of analysis, see McHugh et al. (1974), Blum and McHugh (1984). For an explicit discussion of “deviance”, see McHugh (1970).

9. Although the notion of recursion has been around for some time, its usage here derives from the cybernetic work influenced by Bateson. See Keeney (1983) and Harries-Jones (1995) for a theoretical discussion, and Doran (1989, 1992, 1993) for some empirical examples.

10. Hofstadter (1980: 10) is usually credited with the origin of this term (and its sibling “tangled hierarchy”). See Mulkay (1984) for its applicability within the social studies of science field, Luhmann (1986) for its relevance...
to systems theory and autopoiesis, and Dupuy (1990) for an interesting application to the field of deconstruction.

11. It is Mulkay’s awareness of the problem of recursion, and his ability to demonstrate this recursive loop at work in the mundane practices of researchers, that makes his form of textual analysis so useful here.

12. However, it must be emphasized that my analysis is only concerned with the first half of their book where they are specifically concerned with the media practices organized around the troubling events labelled “mugging”. Moreover, as my analysis only covers a portion of this “strange loop”, it is an open question as to whether an analysis of the whole book would reveal the complete loop (similar to the one that I discovered in Smith’s work on “ideology” (Doran, 1992, 1993)).

13. Unfortunately, I do not have the space here to discuss the growth of “moral panic” analysis among scholars outside this Anglo-American axis. Nevertheless, in my research for this article I came across Australian (e.g. Tiffen, 2004), Dutch (e.g. Roberts and Groenendijk, 2005), Swedish (e.g. Boethius, 1995) and (of course) Israeli (Ben-Yehuda, 1986) contributions; all suggesting that the concept is travelling well, both geographically and linguistically.

14. And although it is beyond the scope of this particular article, Goode and Ben-Yehuda’s (1994) book-length exposition of the concept of “moral panics” may have had some influence on the way in which this concept was imported and popularized in the North American field of social scientific research. In part, this may be because both Cohen’s and Hall et al.’s models were explicitly formulated and discussed within these pages.

15. Although it must be pointed out that Macek does go beyond Hall et al.’s focus on the print media so as to include television news and advertising.

16. Although it may be noted here that some recent Canadian work is seeking to go beyond this critical approach to moral panic analysis, by introducing Foucauldian and governmentality concerns into the analysis (e.g. Hier, 2002; Barron and Lacombe, 2005).

17. Hall’s work is so theoretically rich that it has proved impossible to deal with all his major analytic points on “encoding/decoding” within the confines of one essay. As a result, although I try to give a general overview of the entire “encoding” process here, the empirical demonstration has had to focus on only the initial (“reporting”) phase.

18. For example, my prior attempt (Doran, 2002) at comprehending Policing the Crisis failed to appreciate sufficiently the subtle yet quite different types of theoretical influence that Althusser, Barthes and Gramsci provided for the different sections of Hall et al.’s empirical analysis. In part, this is because Hall et al. tend to background the theoretical sophistication of their project, in favour of empirical analysis.

19. In contrast, Althusser understands history quite differently, in terms of “societies” rather than “individuals”. For him, ‘the “subjects” of history are given human societies. They present themselves as totalities whose unity is constituted by a certain specific type of complexity’ (1969: 231).
20. For example, Hall shows how the different newspapers attempted to “inflect” or displace the story away from its political point and onto some feature or aspect of the politician, for example ‘how does he feel?, how is he taking it?’ (1972: 71).

21. With regard to news photos in general, this is often accomplished by adding a caption or headline in order to “close down” or delimit a photo’s many possible interpretations. As Hall says about the specific analysis he is conducting here, ‘it is a very common practice for the captions to news photographs to tell us, in words, exactly how the subject’s expression ought to be read’ (1972: 71).

22. Although this formal argument was first articulated in a couple of different versions in 1973 (e.g. Hall, 1973), the page numbers referred to in this discussion come from the more widely circulated 1980 version.

23. And in his next paper (1974), Hall identifies one mundane way in which journalists (and other members of the control culture) were able to “make sense” of certain troubling events (“student disturbances”) at that time, by using the deep-structure paradigm of ‘minorities/majorities’ (1974: 280). In other words, this discursive map (of problematic social reality) enabled the journalists mundanely to “classify” these events within a dominant domain of meaning, and without having to pay too much attention to what was actually going on in these incidents.

24. Hall nicely illustrates this thesis by following the passage of an “industrial relations” bill through the British parliament of that time, showing that both government and opposition perspectives are routinely obtained by the media; not just in the initial “reporting” of the story, but in the media’s subsequent organization of the ‘public debate’ (1975: 131) on this issue.

25. Although Hall et al. are quite thorough in many other respects, they tend to be weakest on documenting the specifics of the emergence of the “campaigning voice” with regard to muggings.

26. For a preliminary analysis of these specific media practices, see my ‘Decoding the “Encoding” Process: Moral Panics, Media Practices and Marxist Presuppositions’ (Doran, 2007).

27. For a preliminary analysis of these specific media practices, see my ‘Decoding the Encoding/Decoding Model: Moral Panics, Media Practices and Marxist Presuppositions’ (Doran, 2006).

28. Although it should be emphasized here that the “primary interpretation” sets up the issue as a question necessitating reflection and debate, and as Hall et al. go on to point out, these later phases of the “encoding/decoding” process seek to construct a complex, “ideological closure” around the issue. For reasons of space, my analysis here only focuses on the first phase, what Hall et al. call ‘primary news’ (1978: 83–8).

29. Although Hall et al. do acknowledge that the term “mugging” as a label that could be used for making intelligible specific events in the British context seemed to have come from the police (1978: 71).

30. This analytic focus on the everyday practices of scientists and social scientists is a well-established field of study today. For early examples of this
approach, see Latour and Woolgar (1979) and Garfinkel et al. (1981). However, much of it was inspired by earlier ethnomethodological studies concerned with the common-sense ways in which social scientific researchers made sense of their data (e.g. Cicourel, 1964; Garfinkel, 1967).

31. In fact, at that time in Britain, social science, like the press, rarely included “first-hand accounts of crime” in its analyses. In contrast, in the USA, Becker had popularized such a concern, beginning with his ethnographic work in 1953. And although certain CCCS scholars, at that time, were attempting to introduce this US style of “ethnographic” analysis into Britain (see, especially, the articles collected together in Hall and Jefferson, 1976) it is significant that Hall et al., in this particular project, start from the “primary interpretations” of the newspapers. And even when Hall et al. (1978: 19) had the opportunity to begin with first-hand accounts of the experience of being mugged (Lejeune and Alex, 1973), they chose instead to focus on the history of the label.

32. The concern with explication rather than explanation grew out of the realization that one could only describe the social world from within, and that social life itself was structured like a language. Moreover, by the time that Hall et al. published their work, this alternative approach was not only studying policing (Bittner, 1967; Cicourel, 1968; Sacks, 1972) but the court system as well (Sudnow, 1965; Pollner, 1974a, 1974b).

33. Unfortunately, it is well beyond the scope of this article to trace the “social history” of the “contextualization” (the theoretical tradition of “social reaction” to crime) which accompanies this “identification” (as a “moral panic”). Nevertheless, it would definitely repay further investigation, as there appear to be some similarities at work here. In the first case, the US “referential context” along with the label gets first imported into the UK, then the specific label (mugging) gets “naturalized” for application to certain crimes in the UK, but this specific application in the UK, rather than the US, context brings with it the associated US “referential context” connoting fear and panic. In the other case, although the US theoretical “referential context” (connoting social over-reaction) also seems to get imported into the UK, the specific label “moral panic” seems to have originated in the UK context, rather than the US. Thus further analytic work is needed to document the full details of this “social history”.

34. And from the insights generated by critiques such as these, research projects have been developed which empirically trace the “codification” inherent within these statistical practices (Doran, 1994a, 1994b, 1996).

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