

[Sikk on Herdt, 'Moral Panics, Sex Panics: Fear and the Fight over Sexual Rights'](#)

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Gilbert Herdt, ed. *Moral Panics, Sex Panics: Fear and the Fight over Sexual Rights*. New York: NYU Press, 2009. 304 pp. \$89.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-3722-4.

Reviewed by Helis Sikk (The College of William and Mary) **Published on** H-Emotions (July, 2017)
Commissioned by Ashley M. Mays

Moral Panics, Sex Panics: Fear and the Fight over Sexual Rights is a collection of seven essays edited by cultural anthropologist Gilbert Herdt. Each chapter provides a nuanced perspective on how public emotions about sex are shaped in a particular historical moment. The book explores not only who and what mediates particular panics—the state, media, and various interest groups—but how and with which methodologies we should approach and critique each of these mediators. The chapters provide valuable insights into the state of the field of emotion studies as well as straightforward suggestions for future research directions.

Herdt begins by exploring the markers of panic and providing a meticulous overview of scholarship on emotion studies. Herdt shows how moral panics and sex panics have a genealogy and provides historical context by tracking emotion studies back to Socrates. Sexual panics, for Herdt, are a subspecies of moral panics in which “the sexual other, whether oversexed, or undersexed—is stripped of rights, and the cultural imagination becomes obsessed with anxieties about what this evil sexuality will do to warp society and future generations” (p. 5). Herdt pulls from Stanley Cohen’s theories on moral panics and folk devils to suggest that the main culprit for moral and sex panics is the media, a theme to which several other chapters return.

Chapter 2, by Diane di Mauro and Carole Joffe, unpacks one of the most powerful and successful social movements coming out of the 1980s: the Religious Right, which emerged from the moral panic over abortion and sexual education. Di Mauro and Joffe examine the strategies of the Religious Right’s continuous identification of the targets of cultural anger, which by the end of 1980s were feminists and homosexuals.

Chapters 3 and 4 look at the AIDS crisis. Cathy Cohen’s main interest is the “absence of panic” among “groups hardest hit by the AIDS epidemic—black gay men and heterosexual black men who have sex with men” (p. 108). Cohen argues for more scholarship on sexual citizenship—intersectional work that would help to contextualize how our private sexual decisions impact our public and political status. As Cohen shows, a crucial starting point for this kind of work is in looking at how sex panics work differently within various marginalized communities. Chapter 4, by Gary W. Dowsett, provides a comparison of the discursive strategies of activists and the governments in the United States and Australia. Although an interesting pairing, Dowsett could have discussed more the race and class dynamics of AIDS discourse in those two countries.

Chapter 5, by Herdt, examines the history and culture of “gay” marriage. Herdt returns to his initial

argument in the introduction to show through a close reading of *USA Today* covers how panics are “assisted by media” (p. 157). According to him, the Kinsey Reports marked the beginning of “the deployment of mass media to fan the flames of public sexual illiteracy” (p. 163). Written before the Supreme Court decision that repealed the Defense of Marriage Act in 2013, the chapter works as a period piece that captures the emotional state of many LGBTQA people at the time, which, as Herdt suggests, was hopeful.

The book ends with two of the most intriguing chapters. Chapter 6, by Saskia Eleonora Wieringa, discusses the present-day perils of postcolonial amnesia in former Dutch colonies. According to Wieringa, postcolonial amnesia occurred when the “memories of certain sexual practices, cultures, or norms, specifically related to women’s sexual agency and same-sex practices got lost” (p. 205). The chapter most poignantly reveals the hypocrisy of contemporary Netherlands and postcolonial moral panics. The Dutch blame the former colonies for homophobia and restricting certain clothing for women when as colonizers they were the ones to force native populations to forget same-sex relations and wear Western clothes.

In the last chapter, Janice M. Irvine delves into the more theoretical discussions of feelings as “products of specific political strategies” (p. 249). Irvine’s essay is one of the strongest in the collection when it comes to articulating the importance of the study of emotions. Irvine brings together theoretical debates in the field between Teresa Brennan and Sara Ahmed (the latter rejects the idea of Brennan’s theory of unconscious olfaction). Irvine also explains her own approach to emotion studies, which seeks to integrate the study of the structural elements of public feeling with the social theories of emotion in order to enhance the analytic power of moral panics.

Moral Panics, Sex Panics is a valuable interdisciplinary contribution to emotion, media, and gender studies. It is a dynamic critical study of emotions in the late twentieth century, which we desperately need at a time when the increasing pace of information flow thanks to new media contributes to the rapid spread of moral panics. The collection’s greatest strength lies in chapters that combine theory with practical solutions and suggestions for research that will challenge future moral panics.

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