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Moral panic

Anyone who reads or tunes in regularly to the mass media nowadays cannot fail to be gripped by a sense that Philippine society is headed for a systemic breakdown. Criminals appear more brazen. The police seem more helpless, or in cahoots with the criminals themselves. Prosecutors are unable to pin down the guilty; the courts are not trusted. Journalists are murdered. Politicians are beyond the reach of the law. The metropolis has become the hunting ground of carnappers, terrorist groups, mobile phone muggers, and motorbike-riding holduppers. Criminal syndicates dealing in drugs, human trafficking, and kidnap for ransom operate with impunity. And the whole government itself seems powerless to combat corruption.

Not that these impressions have no factual basis, for indeed we may often validate them with personal experience, but it is equally important that we be aware of the mood they trigger: moral panic. This can be a problem in itself. It often leads to knee-jerk and simplistic responses that solve nothing in the long term. Worse, ill-conceived solutions tend to profile and target minorities and non-conformist subcultures. The poor and the powerless find themselves even more at the receiving end of society's instinct to punish.

The term "moral panic" was coined by the British sociologist Stanley Cohen. In his 1972 book "Folks devils and moral panics," he wrote: "Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the

condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight.”

Cohen’s work is a standard reference in the constructivist analysis of deviance. Here, the interest is not so much in the objective attributes of the deviant act but in the manner in which society constructs the act and responds to it. Society’s response to crime is not as simple as it may seem. Indeed it is a complicated process, and sociologists insist that what makes crime what it is is not some evil element lying intrinsically in the act itself, but the kind of social responses it generates. Some deviant acts are less visible than others. Some suddenly come into the limelight, personified by figures who are nominated to the role of what Cohen calls “folk devils.”

The current folk devils in the Philippine deviant scene are the Ampatuans and former armed forces comptroller Carlos Garcia. Media have virtually portrayed them as lying beyond the pale of morality. Past poster boys of deviance include the menacing figure of Abu Sabaya who once led the dreaded Abu Sayyaf group, and the balding bureaucrat Virgilio Garcillano of “Hello Garci” fame who became the face of electoral manipulation. Each one of these folk devils became the essential representation of the problem that was troubling society at a given point.

Every instance of moral panic, says Cohen, also brings with it its “moral entrepreneurs” – the crusaders, the pontificators, the instant analysts, and the politicians who, to raise their own profiles, would prescribe the death penalty for every crime that hits the headlines. Whether they intend it or not, the media too find themselves at the center of moral panics. By their sheer power of selection of the events worthy of public attention, they can create or sustain a moral panic over a long period. When radio and television jump into the fray, everyday events that might have gone unreported suddenly materialize as manifestations of a full-blown epidemic. Competing for audiences, rival stations and networks outdo one another in

digging up more proof of an incipient social breakdown.

To believe that all this may be part of a destabilization agenda is to carry conspiracy theory too far. We have had these problems before. Past incidents had different perpetrators and varying motives behind them. The bomb explosion inside a public bus along EDSA the other day could well be the handiwork of carnapping syndicates who want to divert police attention from the intensified campaign against them. It could also be a politically motivated terrorist act. We cannot jump to conclusions.

As our population grows bigger and more diverse, the social complexity we generate becomes more astounding than we can possibly imagine. There has been a tremendous increase in road accidents lately. Why? To start with, there are more vehicles on our streets – of varying size and speed, driven by people with varying skills -- all jostling for limited space. It is a new reality to which even veteran drivers must adjust.

It is no different with crime. The new prosperity has spurred consumer demand for a much wider selection of goods, and so there's also more to steal today. That is the reason for the explosion in petty crimes. Meanwhile, our public institutions have remained pre-modern, unable to cope with the challenges of a faster society. Rather than engage in the rhetoric of anxiety, we should focus on the steady modernization of our system of governance. It's the only way to manage complexity.

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