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Paedophile priests between moral panic and denial

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These phenomena must be saying something to us –
if only we could know exactly what.

S. Cohen[1]

Knowledge comes to us through a network of
prejudices, opinions, innervations, self-corrections,
presuppositions and exaggerations, in short through
the dense, firmly-founded but by no means uniformly
transparent medium of experience.

T. W. Adorno[2]

1. Introduction

The paper aims to think over what happens when the concepts
we use within a specific discipline, such as sociology, cross
the frontiers of the disciplinary discourse, coming to the public
debate. The starting point deals with a news story implicating the
catholic Church in a wide scandal. The sequence of events, and
the ways institutions (such as media, political actors and church
representative) construct representations of the scandal, become

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[1] Cohen [2002, IV].

[2] Adorno [2005, 80].

the setting for putting some questions about the proximity between sociological concepts and those in the ordinary language.

2. Loose boundary lines? Paedophile priests between moral panic and denial

During the 2010 spring, the catholic Church is involved in a scandal regarding paedophile priests. From then to now, accusations follow one another, assuming vast proportions and a wide international interest. News about old and new cases of abused minors arrive from Europe, North and South America, Africa and Australia. They increasingly involve, not only individual priests accused of abuses from the Sixties to the present day, but also the highest ecclesiastic hierarchies, who are blamed for hushing many of those episodes up during the past decades. The Church is accused of simply moving the most controversial priests to other dioceses, in the most sensational cases. Often, the presumed paedophiles are not reported and they never appear before a civil court to face their judgement.

This issue provokes, as legitimate, a deep bewilderment all around the world. Progressively, testimonies from other victims add up to the reports. They start talking, maintaining that they were silent for a long time because of fear or shame. Especially during the first few months, the Church reacts by belittling the facts, in order to contrast the attacks directed towards it. The *Avvenire*, the newspaper from CEI - the Italian Episcopal Conference – reports the existence of a "moral panic lobby", interested in throwing discredit on the Church, not to safeguard minors and victims of

the presumed abuses, but in order to reduce its authoritativeness on other "hot" issues debated on the public scene, such as end of life choices, abortion or homosexuals' rights[3]. The term *moral panic* is evoked to signal that the news have been exploited and exaggerated in order to damage and «undermine the very heart of the Church». This is also supported by the second office of the Italian State, the President of the Senate Renato Schifani, on the occasion of his speech in the Vatican for the celebrations of the fifth anniversary of Pope Ratzinger's election.

The concept of moral panic is initially used quite frequently. The Church (and a representative of the Italian Government) adopt this as part of a strategy, also involving media[4], aimed at limiting the relevance of the scandal. Altheide points out that «MP is often used defensively, or as a way to prevent or discourage over-reaction» [2009, 90]. The catholic newspaper introduces moral panic exactly in this way, by highlighting the presence of «two characteristic elements: a real starting data and the exaggeration of this data by «doubtful moral entrepreneurs» [Introvigne 2010]. To support this thesis, the author of the article conveniently remembers that the issue of *child abuse* is one of the recurring topics readily associated with moral panic, together with youth's violence, substances abuse or issues somehow related to sexuality.

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[3] As Soukup has pointed out, the role of the media should also be considered as: «Journalists have helped bring about a convergence between religious scandals and media scandals» [1997, 222].

[4] Recent researches underline a changing relation between moral panic and the media because of a new plurality of media voices [David et al. 2011]. On this subject see also Lull, Hinerman [1997].

At this point, the concept becomes part of the public debate.

Following the emergence of the scandal, the accusation towards the Church is convalidated by a wide documentation gathered from various sources, also within the Church. This will tend to get amplified with an increase in reports in different world countries[5] and, as time passes, moral panic will not be brought up when discussing the issue. The Church will adopt a progressively more cautious attitude, assuming partial responsibility of the events, as in pope Benedict's XVI *Pastoral Letter to the Irish Catholics*, or during various public gatherings in summer 2010[6].

The volatility in the use of this term seems to confirm an additional characteristic traditionally associated with the presence of moral panic: this is its sudden ability to appear and its quick dissolution[7]. Is it appropriate to use the concept of moral panic to describe the events?

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[5] As an example I quote the *Murphy Commission Report*. This Commission was founded in 2006 to inquire on how the Church and the State Authorities deal with the reports of sexual abuses on minors perpetrated by priests in the Dublin diocese. This report makes explicit the aims of the Church on the events: «to keep the secret, to avoid the scandal, to protect the reputation of the Church, to preserve its goods» [in O'Toole 2010]. In 2003, the Archdiocese of Boston pays 85 millions of dollars in order to resolve 500 civil lawsuits on abuses on minors [O'Toole 2010]. Thanks to the inquiry carried out by some *Boston Globe* journalists, 200 out of the 1500 priests operating in the Archdiocese are accused of abuses. The record of extra-judicial agreements is, however, achieved by the Los Angeles Archdiocese which, in 2007, reaches an agreement for 660 millions of dollars, after having already paid 114 millions, for a total of 774 millions [data quoted from the monographic number of the periodical *Malafede. Il lato oscuro della Chiesa*, September 2010].

[6] For instance, this is the content of the *Homily in the Solemnity of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul*, held in the Vatican City on 30/06/2010, in which it can be read: «The church is mostly damaged by what defiles the faith and the Christian life of its members and communities, spoiling the integrity of the Mystical Body, weakening its prophecy and testimony capacity, dulling the beauty of its image» [Malafede, 2010, 30].

[7] According to Cohen, the main elements which characterise moral panic are: 1) widespread feelings of concern; 2) hostility towards the actors who should face the problems; 3) diffused con

What is here at stake does not concern the contraposition between the experts on one side and those who circulate common sense on the other side. The controversy surrounding the meaning of a particular phenomenon is far from been solved with theory or within theory. On this subject, Howard Becker highlights that:

> A first reason these quarrels over definitions are important is that the descriptive titles that embody these concepts are seldom neutral, but rather are terms of praise or blame [Becker, 129].

For instance, it is obvious that, in this case, to attribute or to deny foundation to the term moral panic, in order to account for the role of paedophile priests within the Church, involves two substantially opposite judgements on the conduct of the Ecclesiastic Institution. In the first instance – if moral panic is present – this means that exploitable and groundless attacks are taking place against the Church and its role; in the second instance – if the concept is quoted improperly – the role of "moral entrepreneur" covered by this institution in the society should be questioned in case of the presence of a widespread moral corruption within it. In the first case, the Church would require protection, in the second, it is society which should be safeguarded. In the latter case, the most appropriate concept to describe the situation could be, instead of moral panic, denial[8] [Cohen, 2001].

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sensus on the relevance of the problem and on the necessity to react; 4) disproportion between the perception of the gravity of the problem and the effective risk 5) volatility (with the same speed the problem arises and is subsequently set aside) [2002, XXII].

[8] In a very recent paper, Cohen himself argues about new forms and features of these concepts, maintaining that: «Certain new moral panics can be understood as 'anti-denial' movements. The message is that denial – cover-up, evasion, normalization, turning a blind eye, tolerance, and so on – of certain social conditions, events and behaviours is morally wrong and politically irrational. Acknowledgement becomes the slogan. The previously denied realities must now be brought to

This could assume the shape of denial of the events (*literal denial*: nothing happened) or at least of their implications (*interpretative denial*: something happened but not what you describe). However, it is evident that this is not a small difference.

The event related to the accusations moved towards the Church is a good example of the route that some terms follow, passing from a precise disciplinary and historic context to transit in other discursive environments. This displacement, as previously argued, bears with it consequences on the relations between the involved actors and it poses various questions to the scholars, such as sociologists, interested in studying the representations of reality and the mechanisms which influence them. I intend to focus on this sort of "contamination" of meanings, during the transition from concepts used in the social sciences to their use in the public discourse. If it is agreed that sociology is a discipline founded on the empirical dimension, «aimed at facing social problems» [Bagnasco 2007, 13], using concepts consistently with the assumptions which led to their creation, could be considered as part of sociologists' responsibility. As I will describe, however, the question needs to be rephrased: in order to identify the transformations, which can be judged as more or less appropriate, of the concepts we use, we need to focus our attention not on the concepts *per se*, but on the social relationships behind their use.

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public attention, their dangers exposed, their immorality denounced» [2011, 241]. For a review of the very recent debate about the concept of moral panic, see also the special issue of «Crime Media Culture» [2011], which steams from the conference Moral Panics in the Contemporary World, held at the Brunel University in December 2010, where also a first version of this paper was discussed.

3. Ordinary versus sociological knowledge

The concept of *moral panic* is a good example that enables us to focus on some aspects of the relationship between sociology and common sense. Over the years and in different countries this stimulated a wide debate. This is also testified by the enduring attention about this concept and the subsequent developments, some decades after its initial formulations [Jenks 2011]. Altheide [2009] specifically highlighted how, during the past few years, the concept of moral panic has been widely used in many countries and in many arenas of discourse. This is true not only for the sociological literature – which, particularly focused its attention on the conditions which could favour its onset or on its exploitation for the achievement of social control – but also for the broader sphere of public discourses, for the media, and amongst them, especially for the newspapers. His analysis reconstructs «how moral panic has been used in the mass media in a way that is consistent with entertainment formats» [2009, 79] from the mid Eighties to 2007 in the US and the UK. This shows «that the usage of moral panic increased since 1985» [*ibidem*, 83]. The debate around this concept specified its characteristics, making use of various contacts with empirical research. This also allowed a reflection on the meanings assumed by analogous concepts with the varying of the historical conditions of the contexts on which they have an impact.

It is possible to infer the vitality of a sociological concept from the debate it provokes within the scientific community and from the frequency with which it is used within the specialist

circles where it was formulated. Outside the specialist discourses, and especially for the concepts which are created within the heterogeneous totality of social sciences, those can spread more or less widely and become part of the public discourse assuming shapes which are not always congruent with the original meanings. During this transition, social concepts undergo transformations and become institutionalised within the public discourse and the so called ordinary knowledge. As Altheide describes, they pass «from more concept-specific usage to much broader and "looser" usage that assumes audience familiarity with the term» [2009, 84].

Thus, what is the nature of this familiarity? Firstly, in an attempt to comprehend the possibility that one single concept could be used to describe different phenomena, or that its use could create opposite evaluations of the phenomena which it is aimed at describing, it could be useful to focus on the role of concepts within the sociological discipline. Secondly, it could be helpful to go back and, starting from the example, ponder upon the different meanings assigned to moral panic within the public and ordinary knowledge discourses.

As a first thing, it is possible to stress that the proximity between sociological concepts and those used in the ordinary language has been used to criticise sociology and contextualise its irrelevance. Therefore, sociology has often been considered like «common sense wrapped up in somewhat unattractive jargon» [Giddens 1996, 3]. However, the same Giddens, in his book *In Defence of Sociology*, highlights how this proximity is

not necessarily indicative of a weakness within this discipline. On the contrary, contamination is somehow inevitable and it shows an almost indispensable interest of sociology for reality and its various interpretations. In fact, he argues that:

> There is, however, another, more subtle reason why sociology may appear quite often to proclaim what is obvious to common sense. This is that social research doesn't, and can't, remain separate from the social world it describes. Social world forms so much of our consciousness today that we take it for granted. […]. It is therefore to some degree the fate of sociology to be taken as less original and less central to our social existence than actually is. Not only empirical research but sociological theorizing and sociological concepts can become so much part of our everyday repertoire as to appear as "just common sense". Many discuss moral panics or talk of someone's social status – all notions that originated in sociological discourse [1996, 4].

In this perspective, ordinary knowledge appears as a sort of absorption/simplification of specialistic knowledge, which, during this transition, would acquire a state of obviousness. However, this is not always an obvious and linear process and the outcomes of this transition are not limited to confirming the meaning of those concepts. On this matter, I would like to quote Hans Zeisel's considerations published in 1981 in a review of the volume *Usable Knowledge* by Charles Lindblom and David Cohen. The authors maintain that:

> Ordinary Knowledge, owes its origins to «common sense, casual empiricism, or thoughtful speculation and analysis»[in Zeisel, 1981, 273].

The same Zeisel, in his considerations, agrees, in accordance with the authors, on the inevitability to turn to ordinary knowledge, as:

> Living requires constant social problem solving. […] It is unreasonable

to expect social science to play a preeminent role in this ocean of moment-to-moment decision making [ibidem].

However, Zeisel also highlights how the relevance of the relationship between ordinary knowledge and social sciences knowledge is not equivalent to their necessary identification. This cannot even be used as a criterion to connote in a negative way concepts originated in the field of social sciences, as: «one of the more interesting functions of social research has been to correct ordinary knowledge when it is wrong» [*ibidem*]. On this regard, I report one of the research examples quoted by him. This shows how results produced by the two types of knowledge are not necessarily equivalent:

> As to head-on collisions between ordinary and scientific knowledge, Paul Lazarsfeld's famous review of Samuel Stouffer's The American Soldier comes to mind, in which he had some fun with the knowledge gained from "thoughtful speculation". At the outset he notes that often the argument is advanced that surveys only put into complicated form observations that are already obvious to everyone. He than lists half a dozen convincing examples from The American Soldier and after a thoughtful discussion, asks, "Would it not be wiser to take [these insights] for granted and proceed directly to a more sophisticated type of analysis?" "This might be so," he appears to agree, and then adds, "except for one interesting point about the list. Every one of these statements is the direct opposite of what actually was found [ibidem, 275].

Zeisel, by quoting Lazarsfeld's considerations, pinpoints how proximity with common sense is not equivalent to assuming its point of view without criticism. Even if the concepts we use to build our lines of reasoning could be similar, the social sciences perspective is characterised by an approach which, time after time, investigates their consistency and appropriateness. In fact, our

only way to comprehend reality is to try to identify mechanisms subordinate to its functioning, turning to concepts which could help describe it with ideal typical models[9] and their comparison. What kind of "tools" are the concepts we resort to?

In *Tricks of the Trade*, Howard Becker takes a stand in favour of concepts which are shaped and modified «in a continuous dialogue with empirical data» [1988, 109]. In fact, this operation is necessary in order to subject the concepts which we use to the rules of scientific procedure, which consist of verifying their scientific foundation and appropriateness time after time. However, even this attention involves operations which cannot be taken for granted. So, the concepts utilised in sociological research, do not identify shapes which can satisfy exhaustively the requirements of description:

> That's because we seldom define phenomena by one unambiguous criterion. We dont'say "If it has a trunk, it's an elephant, and that's that" or "If people exchange goods on the basis of price, that's a market". If we talked that way, we would know for sure whether a case was or wasn't one of the things we were interested in. […] In the world we live in, however, phenomena seldom have all the attributes required for them to be, unambiguously, members of a class defined by multiple criteria. An organization has written files, and makes decisions by strict rules, but has no career paths for functionaries. It is a bureaucracy, or not? [ibidem, 128].

Thus, the ambiguous nature of concepts used to describe reality, firstly depends on an objective difficulty of defining the coordinates of the phenomena studied. Secondly it depends on the

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[9] These consist: «of "a systematically related set of criteria surrounding a central issue" that is "sufficiently abstract to be applicable to a variety of national and historical circumstances» [Freidson 1994, 32, in Becker 1998, 109].

difficulty to obtain criteria, which are at the same time wide enough to include its many facets and sufficiently precise to circumscribe some of its aspect for research purposes.

Therefore, if we do not know exactly how social phenomena work, how can the consistency and the appropriateness of a description be judged? Charles Tilly focused his attention on the social implications of processes used to give reasons of the choices we perform. He highlights how «appropriateness and credibility vary from one social setting to another. Different pairs of givers and receivers therefore offer contrasting types of reasons for the same event» [2006, 21]. Tilly argues that this depends on different categories of reasons used according to the relationship between the speaker and the listener and on the different technical skills belonging to each one of the actors involved. Tilly identifies four different categories of reasons[10]. Two of them have close connections with the concept of moral panic and its uses. Those are *stories* and *technical explanations*. The first ones:

> rework and simplify social processes so that the processes become available for the telling; […] they include strong imputations of responsibility, and thus lend themselves to moral evaluations: I get the credit, he gets the blame, they did us dirt. This second feature makes stories enormously valuable for evaluation after the fact, and helps account for people's changing stories of events in which they behaved less than heroically [ibidem, 16].

Regarding technical explanations, as opposed to stories:

> they combine cause-effect explanation (rather than logics of appropriateness) with grounding in some systematic specialised discipline (rather than everyday knowledge) [ibidem, 130].

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[10] Tilly [2006] differentiates between conventions, stories, codes and technical accounts.

Thus, the distinction between who finds it is appropriate to use the concept of moral panic to describe the Church/paedophilia vicissitudes and who, on the contrary does not judge it as suitable, could depend on the different aims of the telling and, consequently, from using two different modalities to give reasons. When the Catholic Church argues that there is a very limited number of paedophile priests, it is attempting to build a coherent narrative, congruent with its aims. In this case, the aim of this institution is to present an image which will not discredit it in front of both believers and public opinion. The most important goal is the possibility to convince, rather that the absolute truth of the statements used. On the contrary, in technical explanations, there is an interest in connecting as much as possible the reasoning with a precise presentation of data. Researchers tend to (or at least they should) pay increased attention to the way in which the concept helps describing some aspects of reality, rather than its capacity to convince.

The difference can be specified by quoting another example, regarding a different topic frequently discussed by public opinion in relation to moral panic. In discussions about migratory phenomena, when the necessity of decreasing migratory fluxes is maintained because of political aims, usually, stories are used more than technical explanations. The reason could be that stories can more easily take advantage of fears diffused among the population [Altheide 2002; Maneri 1991]. Scientific work and technical explanations should rely on a more precise way of

using data on the possible increase in migratory fluxes. Their aim should not be acquiring consensus but the necessity of a careful and updated documentation of the empirical evidences of the phenomenon, which will subsequently be submitted to the public debate. However Boudon pinpoints:

> The media are more drawn to sociological products likely to meet a demand from their audience than sociological products with a cognitive function [2002, 376].

In real terms, those two modalities of giving reasons are not always separated and often narrations become part of the practices used by scholars. Those are not always estranged from the logics of political debates and consensus in the name of abstract ideals, bound to a superior analytic need, far from reality and its implications. In fact, stories have an increased power to appear convincing, compared to technical explanations. This is so because they are built with the intention to reach a wide and non-specialised audience, stimulating emotions. Moreover they are difficult to oppose for those who try to utilise sources and information more adequately, for instance for disciplinary reasons. However, it is important to be aware that trying to contrast stories by resorting to technical explanations could not be successful from the communication point of view, also because of the relational nature of concepts and meanings that those could assume, depending on the different audiences to whom they are addressed.

4. On the relational dimensions of the moral panic concept and its use in the example offered

At this stage, it should be clear that difficulties we meet when trying to define the reality around us depend, mostly, not as much (or not only) from subjective or disciplinary limitations, but also from the multidimensional nature of the phenomena observed and from the aims pursued by each actor (such as journalists and scholars). The more general complications regard the relationship between concepts originated in the social sciences circles and society as a whole. It is possible to pinpoint some more elements through an exploration of the specific characteristics of the concept we are working on, especially regarding the multiplicity of the relational aspects which are implied in its use. The relational dimension, besides allowing us to specify the articulation of the concept, permits us – as I will try to demonstrate in the conclusion – to prefigure a possible way to get out of the dead end about the scholars' responsibility on its use and the plurality of its meanings.

The concept of moral panic, as many other concepts, assumes a relational dimension which can be articulated on different levels. The first one deals with the *relationship between context and scholars at the moment in which it was originally formulated*. Garland highlights that this concept begins to take shape in a historic moment characterised by a widespread attention to social control elements found in society:

As Cohen points out in his introduction to the third edition of Folk Devils and Moral Panics (2002), the term "moral panic" emerged from late 1960s social reaction theory, especially the concern with the media's role

in stereotyping and misrepresenting deviance and the perception that such reporting might contribute to a deviancy amplification spiral. […] In the face of what they regarded as uniformed, intolerant, and unnecessarily repressive reaction to deviance by conservative authorities, these sociologists developed a standard critical response, a critique with which to counter oppressive social reaction [2009, 19].

The concept was born as a *counter-narrative*[11] to shift, from the mid Eighties, «to a news narrative that includes opposition or "other-side" views, and it's incorporated within news formats (e.g. editorials and op-eds) that are dedicated to offering different views on certain topics» [Altheide 2009, 81]. In the concrete case here described, the narration shift does not concern so much newspapers, which still amplify its significance and which still take advantage of the dynamics triggered when it is evoked. In fact, it involves especially the role of some representatives of government elites and of the same Church. This process of *recontextualization* [Bernstein 1990, 60, in Iedema e Wodak 2009, 13] definitely shifts the focus of attention on power and on how this takes shape through the narratives produced and circulated. Therefore, this second relational dimension could be defined as the *power to redefine reality*.

In the case here observed, a difference which deserves attention is that the presumed activation of panic was reported by the Church, one of the largest international institutions, not by an underprivileged group or by someone trying to defend it. Moral

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[11] As Cohen points out in his introduction to the third edition: «Folk Devils and Moral Panics was informed by the sixties fusion of labelling theory, cultural politics and critical sociology. Today's students of moral panic do not have to engage with this theoretical mix-up. They can go straight into the literature on social constructionism and claims-making» [2002, XXII].

panic, initially used as a weapon against those who hold the power of labelling the deviants in order to reveal their plots, was used here by representatives of powerful groups in order to defend their *status quo*.

The last relational dimension concerns the issue defined by Garland in terms of «*ethics of attribution*, that shapes the use of the term, and occasionally restrains analysts from applying it» [2009, 24]. Let us see what it is meant by this expression:

> There may be situations in which the empirical conditions seem to invite "moral panic" analysis but where ethical considerations make the attribution seem tactless, morally insensitive, or otherwise inappropriate [ibidem].

This scholar points out how, the reaction which developed following the 9/11 events[12], could have explicitly addressed this concept:

> This was an episode of social reaction that seems clearly to meet the criteria of a moral panic attribution – exhibiting concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, and volatility, as well as a definite moral dimension and a sense that a way of life is being threatened – and yet there is a definite reluctance to describe this episode as involving a moral panic [ibidem].

However, this attribution is (at least partially) possible only after six years from the events.

> Now that emotions have cooled, and fears receded, analytical skepticism seems more feasible, although many still regard it as scandalous and irresponsible [ibidem, 25].

The three aspects which connote the relational dimension

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[12] About the role of the media behind the growth of dramatization in presenting the news, see also Ekström and Johansson [2008]; Monahan [2010].

of the concept can thus be defined as: the cultural contest of its original formulation, the power dynamics between the actors involved in defining the situation, and the ethics of appropriateness in regard to the historical moment. They allow us to focus on the dynamic nature of definitions and permit to somehow rephrase the question from which we started. Dealing with the normative aspects of moral panics:

> When someone describes an episode as a moral panic, it's always possible to suppose that he or she is simply refusing to take seriously the moral viewpoint of those who are alarmed. What the analyst sees as a hysterical overreaction may be seen by the participants as an appropriate response to a deeply moral evil [Garland 2009, 22]

Can the sociologist be held responsible for the way in which the meanings of a particular concept are defined? At this point, it should be clear that, in the presence of such complex and changeable conditions, the question appears out of place. However, the sociologist's responsibility does not dissolve and, how I argue in the final considerations, it requires to be redefined, shifting its focus from the meanings as such to the conditions which could allow to publicly question them.

5. Conclusions

Even though external conditions[13] seem to reduce sociologists' responsibility in the diffusion of their concepts outside of the disciplinary sphere, it should be possible to recover

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[13] Such as the speed of circulation of the information, in ways which would have been inconceivable even in the recent past, which prevents control over the diffusion of well-grounded and reliable contents.

our responsibility by trying to redefine it. I mean that, on the one hand, it is neither possible, in the age in which we are living, to keep under control the proliferation of meanings produced nor to ascribe to science a thaumaturgic power which it did not show to hold[14]. On the other hand, it is necessary to contribute to the development of sociology not in a self-referential way, by being open about the possibility to rethink and rephrase the concepts we use, paying attention to the way in which they are understood and applied in a constantly redefined reality. As the words contribute to the construction of the reality around us, it appears as increasingly necessary to set up spaces and occasions in which to publicly discuss[15]. This does not imply disinterestedness or unawareness about the effects produced when the categories used spread around the world. For instance, when Cohen [2002] identified the discourses on welfare frauds as one of the seven typical spheres[16] which characterise the diffusion of moral panic within society, he was also interested in finding a possible connection with the subsequently produced events. The amplification of a climate of mistrust towards the protection system, mainly by the media,

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[14] Discussing how the social sciences are taken into consideration and their role in the present day society is obviously a broad topic and is beyond the aim of this paper. However I will quote a consideration by Giddens on this regard, as he identifies in the image of the natural sciences a normative ideal to whom social sciences often conform: «I do not think you could find a single reputable philosopher of science who believes any longer in the conception of natural science to which many social scientists aspired. Natural science, as it clearly demonstrated in the post-Kuhnian philosophy of science, is a hermeneutic or interpretative endeavour. […] The framing of meaning is actually more fundamental than the discovery of laws» [1998, 68].

[15] On the role of public debate for democracy, see also Sen [2009].

[16] These typically concern juvenile violence, school violence, drugs, child abuse, sex and violence, welfare cheats and single mothers, refugee and asylum seekers.

was – according to the author – functional to the heavy cuts on the protection system made by Thatcher during the Eighties.

The scholar's attention – as Cohen does throughout his work – has to be focused on the understanding of processes and mechanisms which determine them. The decision to carry out reporting or contrasting politically the phenomena in action, can be performed in another capacity, as a citizen. Moreover, Becker argues that, in order to understand the relevance of a statement, it is appropriate to study the social conditions that made it possible, the situation in which a specific category is addressed, which problems belong to the group who typically uses it:

> One thing you don't do is try to decide what it really is, whatever "it" is. That's not a social scientist's business, although many social scientists have thought it was; our business is to watch others try to enforce the ban of something from some prized category, not to decide whether the ban is justified [ibidem 1998, 158].

In this perspective, a "badly used" concept could be as useful as one "used correctly", as long as a dialectic between positions and interpretations is possible. This dialectic allows the knowledge of the world to become stronger. For this reason it is incorrect to circumscribe the accepted meanings and it is important to extend the discussion on the social conditions which made them possible. A concept which leads us in this direction, such as moral panic, is a good one, as it can allow us to move some steps towards the process of knowledge of reality, as long as it is capable of stimulating well grounded discussions and that it is possible to work on constructing the social conditions that foster them.

If the choice of categories produces undeniable repercussions on the way in which problems are shaped and faced, the aim and the responsibility of sociology should concentrate on the reconstruction of the mechanisms by which those effects are produced. For instance, this is the case of the shapes which can be assumed by the context or of the way in which individuals consider themselves or are considered by others. Gloria Regonini, an Italian scholar interested in public policies and in the processes which lead to their definitions, highlights that: «what makes the difference is not the realism of assumptions, but their ability to activate probes capable of entering processes otherwise excluded» [Regonini, 2001, 407]. Thus, it becomes necessary to locate some practice-oriented ways out, which could help defining empirically-grounded analysis and reflections on the categories used. Firstly, the *experimentation* allows us to formulate *provisional truths* and thus «reversible and challengeable on the basis of new beliefs or new coalitions» [*ibidem,* 237]. Secondly, the *learning* requires a constant monitoring of the choices and consequences which those determine [*ibidem,* 238]. The third way out is *reflectivity*. This deals with the awareness that each point of view is biased and with the consequent possibility to «look from different perspectives at the situation in which [the analyst] is involved» [*ibidem,* 242].

As Foucault, which dedicated a large part of his activity as scholar to reconstruct historical-social meanings associated to the practices and concepts which are implied, argued:

Given a certain problematization, you can only understand why this kind of answer appears as a reply to some concrete and specific aspect of the world.

There is the relation of though and reality in the process of problematization. And that is the reason why I think that it is possible to give an answer - the original, specific, and singular answer of thought- to a certain situation. And it is this kind of specific relation between truth and reality which I tried to analyze [1985][17].

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[17] The six lectures were delivered on the UC Berkeley Campus in October and November of 1983. See accompanying print transcript: Foucault, *M. Fearless speech*. Ed. Pearson, Joseph. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001. UC Berkeley holdings: BJ1421.F68 2001 MAIN. Online transcript available from: http://foucault.info/documents/parrhesia/foucault.DT6.conclusion.en.html.

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