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From Media Hype to Twitter Storm

News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises and Public Opinion

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Edited by
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Urban security as discursive formation

Marcello Maneri

Abstract
Concepts like media hype and moral panic are often studied through a juxtaposition of public concern and actual 'reality'. Drawing on my previous studies on moral panics about urban security in Italy, I illustrate how opinion polls and data on crime – the usual indicators for disproportionality – are more the result of changing practices, priorities, and definitions than 'real life' indicators. Foucault's idea of discursive formation helps us to see these supposedly objective indicators as embedded in the same phenomena they are supposed to measure from the outside. Nonetheless, as long as they are conceived as statistics interacting with the forces that mould them, they can be important for the analysis of media hypes and moral panics.

Keywords: moral panic, media hype, discursive formation, urban security, disproportion, social concern

Self-reinforcing news waves have always attracted not only scholars', but also the public's attention. The expression 'media hype' was used in popular debate before being conceptualized as a framework for research (Vasterman, 2005). Similarly, but in reverse, the concept of 'moral panic' (Cohen, 2002 [1972]; Hall et al., 1978; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009 [1994]) was introduced in scholarly work but ended up being widely used in public debates. This unrestricted interest in both ideas has not been only beneficial. Everyday concepts are typically loaded with value judgements and these theoretical models could be suspected of doing the same. Indeed, the concept of moral

panic has already been criticized on this basis (Waddington, 1986; Garland, 2008). The idea of moral panic, it has been argued, is often used to dismiss social problems that can be unimportant for the scholar, but which can be disturbing for the people involved.

Understandably, many authors tried to find empirical indicators in order to ground the 'hype idea' on a solid base. For example, several studies focused on scares about problems that eventually produced almost no damage. Others showed how the emergent alarming phenomenon that had triggered the panic, on the contrary, was declining. The contrast with 'objective facts' is often striking and gives the sensation of a fatal blow to the fault-finder. However, these external indicators of disproportion are not so easily available and may be affected by the news waves themselves, reflecting the hype as much as the 'facts'. A different strategy calls for the investigation of what the media (and their associates) precisely do, studying the various steps in the process of amplification (Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995; Vasterman, 2005; Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009; Maneri, 2013a). Despite its undeniable merits, this approach does not look like a knock-out, leaving many researchers tempted to go back to the familiar 'reality on the ground'.

As I will try to argue below, without an adequate examination of the production of this 'external reality', i.e. of the construction of the data on crime, illness, or any other condition, there is a risk of falling into the ill-conceived alternative between the existence or non-existence of a real problem out there. Figures are rising? No media hype. They are shrinking? What media hype! Despite the interest of figures, to rely on them means to lose the grasp of the sociological nature of hypes and panics. Worse, it means the danger of naturalizing evidence that is the outcome of both hypes and panics. As moral panics and media hypes tend to emerge in series, and are generally part of deeper crises, they navigate in an agitated enunciative field (Foucault, 1969). The discursive formations that arise from that field give shape to new objects that interfere with the 'facts' and construct the world that the researcher would like to measure. The following pages are an attempt to explain this claim, building on what happened in Italy in the field of 'security'. Thinking of the problems foregrounded by hypes and panics in terms of discursive formations, where appropriate, helps to better see the issue of the relationship between facts and representations.

Preamble: A 'rape emergency' in Rome

At the beginning of 2009, a series of rapes perpetrated in the city of Rome and its surroundings grabbed unprecedented public attention. While other similar episodes had not been given much consideration, if they were reported at all, four sexual assaults reached the front pages of national newspapers and received a prominent position and sensationalistic coverage in prime time TV news. In just a single national newspaper, the widely read and liberal *la Repubblica*, these four incidents totalled 308 articles in three months.

As Figure 1.1 shows, each new episode was reported with greater attention and gave the opportunity for thematically related follow-ups on the previous ones. The key event that triggered the news wave took place at a party organized by the municipality of Rome on New Year's Eve. The circumstance and the moment explain the attention paid by the media. The following incidents, however, were perpetrated in anonymous, isolated areas: an abandoned periphery in the neighbourhood of Primavalle on 21 January, a secluded road in the Roman satellite town of Guidonia on 23 January, and a hidden corner in Caffarella park on 14 February.

Why did they become sensational news? Why in Rome and why in 2009? Rome's mayor had been elected three months before with a campaign
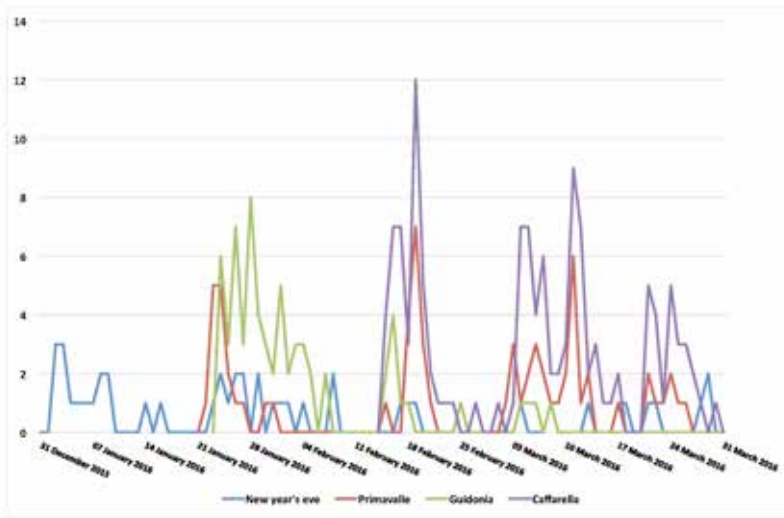

Figure 1.1.   Coverage of four sexual assaults in *la Repubblica*, 1 January 2009-31 March 2009. Number of articles per day

centred on urban security and had already claimed a sharp reduction in crime with the use of zero-tolerance measures. So he could be easily attacked by his opponents for his failure. In other words, these episodes were politically viable, and not only for this reason. More importantly, the main target in his fight on crime was people from the Roma ethnic group.

Actually, none of the victims had accused a member of the Roma community of the assault. In the last three aggressions, they had described dark-skinned men with an Eastern European accent. The police soon directed its search towards people coming from Romania who, like Roma people, had been presented as a public danger[1] in recent times. One year before, the homicide in Rome of a woman by a Romanian citizen (of the Roma ethnic group) had become a national emergency. The outrage had triggered a political campaign on both sides of the political spectrum about the dangerousness of people from Romania. This led to the passing, in one day, of a Legislative Decree that made possible expulsions of Romanian citizens.[2] In part as a result of this episode, Roma and Romanians were often confused by the media and the public. The Roma/Romanian represented the stereotypical villain and his misconduct raised the greatest social alarm and deserved the toughest measures.

After three weeks of a search for the culprits, the two initial (Romanian) suspects of the Caffarella park incident had to be released. But the DNA found on the victim, interpreted as 'confirm[ing] that the nationality is Romanian',[3] was used to justify a narrow investigation: the perpetrators had to be Romanian. The media emphasis on the suspects' origin confirms the same framing: merging victims' testimonies, popular reaction, and source statements, newspapers and TV news foregrounded foreign origin as a source of danger, fear, and anger. Headlines included: 'Patrols and baseball bats: Primavalle, it's open season on Romanians' (*Ronde e mazze da baseball. Primavalle, è caccia ai romeni*', 24 January); 'Guidonia, immigrant hunting' (*Guidonia, caccia agli immigrati*', 27 January), and 'Rape, here's Romanians' hideout' (*Stupro, ecco il covo dei romeni*', 29 January).

As in the previous year, the political reaction was swift and muscular. Two ministers (from the xenophobic party *Lega Nord*) demanded castration for rapists, chemical or surgical. An 'anti-rape Decree' passed on 23 February 2009,[4] strengthening measures against sexual assailants, stalkers and, yes, immigrants. More interestingly, the spectacular clearance of informal settlements (often inhabited by Roma families) was widely publicized, despite the absence of any direct link between Roma and rapists. Then, after three months, the attention on rape cases gradually faded away. As it turned out, the first two episodes had been invented, but that revelation received little attention.

Media hypes and moral panics: Similarities and differences

The 'rape emergency' of 2009 is a typical case of media hype. A key event triggers media attention and a news theme (Fishman, 1978) is established. Subsequently, every incident or declaration that can confirm the news theme is given more attention than usual, starting a consonant news wave; the latter rises suddenly and fades away gradually. The number of news reports is not related to the frequency of actual events, but it is the result of the lowering of the threshold of newsworthiness, which leads to the massive reporting of thematically-related episodes, features, and opinions. The wave is also the outcome of the interaction of the media with other relevant social actors, like politicians, public officials, grassroots groups, and experts.

At the same time, this 'emergency' is also a clear instance of a moral panic episode, where a condition, or a group of persons

> emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values [...] its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion [...], moral barricades are manned by editors, [...] politicians and other right-thinking people [...] ways of coping are evolved (or more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears (Cohen, 2002).

The model of moral panic was developed in the fields of Criminology and Sociology of Deviance, and, with some exceptions (Maneri, 2001, 2013a; Chritcher, 2003), it dedicates little attention to the mechanisms that generate, propagate, and dissolve a news wave. However, this body of research showed very effectively how the media can suddenly stir up public indignation towards a deviant group in a process of collective stigmatization, declaring a high level of threat with graphic vocabulary, and leading frequently to exceptional punitive and preventive measures.

If media hypes amplify the representation of a problem – in that the public tends to believe that the greater the number of news reports, the greater the seriousness of the condition (Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995) – then when they build on a sense of moral outrage, qualifying as a moral panic, their social effects may well be more important. The public, on behalf of which the news media speak, is not only worried (as in the case of a dreaded bird flu pandemic), but also indignant. To the public's expectation of protection is added a self-righteous wrath against those who violate our norms, and a call for punishment of a generalized 'other'. This emotional activation can be a powerful social force, one that has been manipulated in well-known episodes in history.

Open issues: Disproportion and public concern

What makes media hypes and moral panics so interesting is their creative power, their ability to amplify and, especially in the second case, to mobilize. From the beginning, what attracted much attention was the disproportion between the nature of the actual threat and the amplitude of the societal reaction. As disproportion and concern are two central but controversial ideas in both sociological models, I will dedicate some space to their examination.

The risk with the idea of disproportion is to take the sociologist's evaluation of the harm and her concern about it as the reference point for judgements about the correct representation of a social phenomenon, or about 'reasonable concern' over a particular condition. This family of critiques, frequent in the moral panic debate (Waddington, 1986; Watney, 1987; Ungar, 2001; Cornwell & Linders, 2002), led to attempts at finding indicators that could be used to assess whether the portrayal and the concern about a threat are disproportionate. Among the indicators proposed by scholars are the statistical trend of the deviant behaviour, the attention paid to the condition as compared to that paid at another point in time, and the exaggeration and fabrication of figures. The first indicator, the comparison between representation and 'hard facts', is very attractive for its objective flavour, but often difficult to manage. If a moral panic is successful, it will unleash a repressive tide, influence the perception of the public, and stimulate the reporting of the crime, thereby affecting statistics that will eventually measure a blend of deviant behaviour and reactions to it. In addition, as Young (2011) pointed out with respect to illegal drug use, the construction of a dangerous problem and its criminalization can create a secondary harm that is greater than the primary harm. For example, it can harden the original deviance so that the societal reaction can appear proportionate to the present condition, but out of all proportion if we consider the original situation.

In sum, the productive nature of moral panics may make the idea of 'objective' facts ambiguous, something to which I will return later. Even when empirical data on deviant behaviour seem to corroborate the researcher's perception of disproportion, they should be handled with prudence. In the 'rape emergency' in Rome, for example, the prime minister declared that rapes were decreasing and yet the government had to intervene because of the clamour. So, we could say that the clamour was disproportionate. But how reliable are crime statistics that, in the case of the rape crime, are estimated to record only about nine per cent of actual sexual assaults? And what about place, time, and circumstances: is four rapes in Rome in the first

two months of the year perpetrated by strangers more than usual, less, or about the same? Clearly, the claim of a crisis may find empirical support in many ways, and in as many ways the sociologist can dismiss it. Objective data can have very subjective meanings.

The other indicators mentioned before do not make reference to 'objectively recorded' deviant behaviour, but instead to what the media do. Do they adopt alarmist and emotive tones, hyperbole, prominent headlines? Do they use ad hoc evidence (statistics, summaries of episodes) to convey a sense of crisis, or do they hysterically demand tough measures? Do they change their standards of newsworthiness, selecting and highlighting what in routine news making is, in comparison, downplayed or overlooked? The analysis of media behaviour and language, together with the examination of the self-reinforcing news wave, does not make any reference to the correspondence of the message to 'objective reality'. While the search for 'objective facts' tends to cage the researcher into a forced alternative, i.e. between saying that something is the source of justified concern or that it is socially constructed (meaning 'fake'), when we analyse the media and other social actors' reciprocally oriented actions, a rise in deviant behaviour may or may not be there. Nevertheless, in both cases the 'problem' is socially constructed, i.e. actively shaped. It is precisely the nature, background, and consequences of this construction that deserve to be addressed.

Since both media hypes and moral panics revolve around a problem, it is reasonable to think that there should be somebody concerned about it. Indeed, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) considered public concern as a necessary attribute for the researcher in order to speak of a moral panic. However, both the amount and nature of concern and, above all, *whose* concern we are talking about is often taken for granted, implying deep and widespread concern among the public or society as a whole. Nevertheless, the media, public officials, activists, and public opinion are different entities that may have diverse levels of concern. In addition, worry, outrage, fear – generally conflated in the single concept of concern (or fear) – are different emotions and indicators developed to measure each of them could give rise to different results.

That the media and moral entrepreneurs in general are concerned is easy to see: they mobilize. Whether they are genuinely worried or instrumentally riding the issue of the month is another thing, as difficult to investigate as it is scarcely useful to understand the overall dynamic. But whether and how the public is concerned is an interesting sociological question, because it is in its name that troops are rallied, and how much the public is bothered is a key legitimization in any speech or intervention. Surely enough, the public

is claimed to be worried, scared, outraged. The public, as it is explicitly or implicitly represented in the media and in public statements, is concerned. But what about what real people actually think?

People could be more or less worried or scared. Some of them surely are, others are not. In the short term, an important fraction of the public could be, or could not be, influenced by the media representation of the events, but after the wave disappears it could just as well forget about the concerning events. So is public concern a long-lasting consequence of moral panics and media hypes or just a close and volatile mirror of media waves? Is it even an independent variable in the process? The role of concern in the dynamic of a moral panic should always be addressed and so should its temporal trend. However, in this case as well, objective indicators are less objective than their usual treatment would suggest. I will return to this problem below, but before doing this it is necessary to introduce a new conceptual framework.

Repeated hypes and panics as discursive formation

An important point to take into account is the fact that often moral panics appear in series, in connection to fundamental changes in societies that bring about problems in the social order. The targeted condition and group relate closely to underlying anxieties (Cohen, 2002), which are a symptom of disruptive change (Young, 2009). Since the early 1990s at least, particularly in Europe, migrants have assumed the unenviable role of the salient folk devil. To put it simply, they symbolize what is wrong with so-called globalization. From below, they can be seen as the cause of the end of a perceived symbolic order. From above, they can provide an occasion to rally popular consent, by displacing concerns and fears onto them, to delegitimize the ruling majority or, on the part of the government, to re-legitimize itself.

Repeated moral panics and the residue they leave – in terms of rumours, coalitions, priorities, institutional practices, and norms – are the surface manifestations of power relations that set the conditions of existence, or 'enunciative field', for what Foucault (1969) called a discursive formation. With this expression, he meant a system of connected discourses conveying ideas, attitudes, and courses of action that systematically construct their objects and the worlds of which they speak. In other words, moral panics are often part of, and instrumental to, a wider, new framework for making sense of and dealing with something that concerns a given community. The new discursive formation provides patterns of sensitive issues, perspectives, concepts, and themes that constrain the range of current truths.

As I will claim in the next section, this has happened in Italy (and elsewhere) with regard to the discourse on urban security. The discourse on security became the framework to interpret and handle the presence of a new immigrant population, establishing a set of priorities, ideas, objects, and categories that shaped the way social reality could be understood. Returning to the issues left open in the moral panic debate, in this 'enunciative field', public representations and reactions are not simply 'disproportionate', and concern and fear are not merely more or less widespread, because it is the very way society defines and deals with 'a new problem' that is at stake. All data at that point are deeply embedded in the new discursive formation, be it in the form of opinion polls or media coverage. Analysis of the discourse and practices on security clarifies this point.

The discursive formation on 'security' in Italy

Discourse on urban security emerged gradually in Italy. Beginning in the late 1980s, a series of protests were organized by groups of residents in the streets against such phenomena as prostitution, drug dealing, and selling of merchandise, as well as against the mere presence of settlements of immigrants or of Roma. These mobilizations did not receive much consideration by politicians and the media until, in 1990, the first comprehensive law on immigration was discussed in parliament. From then on, immigration would be a political issue, one that allowed political parties to distinguish themselves in relation to an important topic.

At this point, protesters were courted by mayors, political parties, and local officials, who zealously proposed remedies for problems that the media were presenting using graphic language and Us-Them rhetoric. Their solutions were tough and ostentatious. In concert with law enforcement, they organized police roundups and raids and, in particular, pursued a policy of eradication with regard to immigrant encampments. These sweeps, in turn, became news events themselves and confirmed the peril posed by the individuals involved.

When Italy joined the Schengen agreement in November 1990, European authorities were calling for a strengthening of controls at the Area's borders. Illegal immigration was becoming the privileged target of police operations, both at the frontiers and in areas associated with immigrants. Illegal migrants, or '*clandestini*' as they were named, were the most convenient point of intervention in situations that were often in between marginality and deviance. Not only did their illegal status permit their administrative

expulsion for behaviours that often were not crimes, but when they did commit crimes, this illegality permitted the authorities to proceed without having to deal with a complicated gathering of judicial evidence (Quassoli, 2013). '*Clandestini*' soon became the quintessential Other.

For many years, following cycles that tended to become most energetic in proximity to election season, sheriff-mayors, rabble-rousing activists, and other moral entrepreneurs of insecurity expanded their radius of action, fulminating against 'illegal street vendors', 'traffic light window washers', 'street pirates', 'foreign-born muggers', and 'Albanian/Roma/Romanian rapists'. This hysteric turmoil took place in a period of dramatic financial crises. Italy had to exit the European Monetary System in 1992 due to repeated currency attacks from international speculators, and then had to fight hard to meet the requirements to enter the Euro zone. The unrest was also a symptom of a legitimization crisis for the political elite: the '*Tangentopoli*' corruption scandal between 1992 and 1994 had wiped out all the parties that had been governing for thirty-five years. Going after 'what the people want', in this situation, was seen as an effective means of replacing people's fears and contempt with popular support.

Beginning in the second half of the 1990s, what had often been a local issue became established on a national level, in daily news reports, television coverage, and political debate. Individual episodes reported in the news were connected thematically and transformed into national crisis situations quickly framed as 'immigration emergencies.' Moral panics began to spread: an 'invasion' of 'fake refugees from Albania', several 'rape alarms', a 'homicide emergency', and so on.

The 2001 electoral campaign opened with the theme of 'security'. The posters of the candidates from the two principle parties read: 'More security for all' (Berlusconi, centre-right) and 'Everyone has the right to be safe. My duty is to guarantee that right. The law should apply equally to everyone; stop the traffic of illegals; speed up our system of justice' (Rutelli, centre-left). The climax was reached with the beginning of the 2008 election season. At that point, representatives of the Democratic Party (centre-left) began to repeat, whenever possible, such slogans as 'security is everybody's business', 'security is the fundamental right that underlies all others', and '[security] isn't a left-wing or a right-wing idea', in an attempt to gain ground on a topic that had become decisive and had always been their opponent's signature song.

As Figure 1.2 shows, 'urban decay' and 'security' became, in the course of a few years, an inescapable refrain. In the *Corriere della Sera*, one of the two major national newspapers, these terms were employed in twenty to thirty
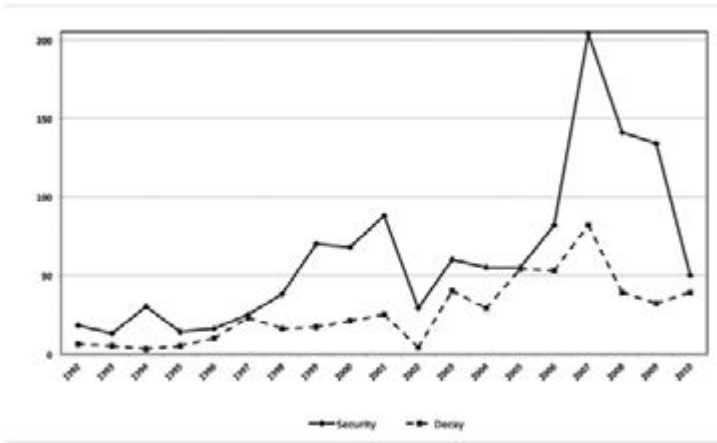
Figure 1.2.   Frequency of the words 'urban decay' and 'security' as problems of petty crime and
immigration in headlines from Corriere della Sera 1992-2010. Absolute values

headlines per year in the first half of the 1990s, but nearly three times that amount in the second half of the decade. In the critical three years between 2007-2009, the incidence of headlines containing these terms was nearly ten times greater than it had been a decade earlier.[5] In the election year 2008, 'urban decay' and 'security' appeared in 286 headlines – essentially, once a day with weekends off.

What is no less important is the mutation of the meanings assigned to these terms. At the beginning of the 1990s, the word 'security' ('*sicurezza*') was used in the context of potential dangers in transportation, public buildings, and construction sites or was related to the risk of terrorist acts. 'Decay' ('*degrado*') meanwhile, had to do with the presence of garbage or the deterioration of public infrastructure. An extremely different meaning of the term 'decay' – one that barely existed for the entire preceding decade – began to take precedence during the second half of the 1990s. In that period, the term 'decay' came to be used, almost without exception, to refer to the degeneration of the urban landscape and the threats to residents' safety (security) caused by the presence of immigrants, Roma, the homeless, drug addicts and prostitutes, petty criminals, and late-night noise.

The term 'security' was also transformed, in a process that took a bit longer but was quantitatively more relevant. If we consider the ordinances issued

by various city mayors beginning in 2007 (later regulated by a 5 August 2008 Ministerial Decree that granted mayors additional powers to provide for urban security) and the production of legislative measures (so-called security packages approved in 2008 and 2009), what becomes visible is the way in which the concept of security, even in a general expansion of the sphere of repressive legal responses, constitutes a clearly delimited object. From the entire universe of phenomena that could threaten security – even in the limited sense of physical safety – the entities that are pinpointed are '*clandestini*', Roma, and rapists (targeted by national laws), along with drug dealers, itinerant merchants, traffic-light window washers, beggars, the homeless, squatters, prostitutes, and young people who threaten public decorum and disturb the peace (drawn from an impressive number of mayoral ordinances – at least 508 in a seven-month period, see Cittalia-Fondazione Anci ricerche, 2009). All of these are categories clearly associated in the public mind with the presence of immigrants.

To summarize, in the context of a political conjuncture characterized by crisis, instability, and the establishment's delegitimization, most politicians, media, grass-roots groups, and public officials formed a short circuit of reciprocal pressures[6] that identified immigration, and associated phenomena, as the principal threat to security and tranquillity. A set of new objects – simultaneously abstract and concrete – was created, namely 'insecurity' and 'decay', associated with 'illegals' and their threat to ordinary people and 'decorum'. These objects were the coordinates of a 'surface of emergence' (Foucault, 1969) for 'new' problems that were put at the centre of public preoccupations. In order to deal with these newly objectified problems, an impressive apparatus of police operations, law enforcement reorganizations, legislative and administrative measures was deployed. All these practices offered sites of visibility through which immigration could be made sense of and spoken about.

This web of power/knowledge relations imposed undisputable priorities and correlated 'realities', thus establishing a 'regime of truth', i.e. rules of formation for a discursive statement, conditions according to which a statement will be deemed true. A regime of truth operates by rules of exclusion: it limits the objects that can be spoken of, the position from where one may speak, who may speak, and how.

As far as objects were regarded, the inclusion in security discourse of a limited set of offences and of a restricted set of culprits implied the exclusion of other crimes and perpetrators. The definition of urban security was a veritable masterpiece in the creation of its own world. Sustained from the beginning by an array of metaphors – such as the 'invasion', 'flood',

'assault', or 'conquest' of a 'besieged' community that had become a 'hunting ground' for petty criminals – the idea of security changed definition and metaphorical trappings when the image of an unprecedented surge of street crime had to be abandoned after several years of declining crime figures. The politicians who admitted that 'objective insecurity' could not be described as an emergency were glad to discover, on the other side of the ocean, the concept of 'perceived insecurity'. If objective reality was not there, a subjective reality was, and deserved attention. Thus, the problem was smartly redefined as 'demand' or 'need' for 'security'. A new set of metaphors was ready for the occasion: 'An unsettling spectre is haunting Italy. It is insecurity. Dense and severe enough to border on fear' (*la Repubblica*, 6 November 2007). In the 2000s, 'social alarm', 'fear', which 'floods', 'spreads like a virus', is a 'nightmare', and 'holds hostage the country' was the new thing.

In this democracy of security, those authorized to speak are 'the people' (i.e. what has been constructed as public opinion) and those who study them (accredited scholars, but especially pollsters), who act as spokespersons for them (the media), who represent or embody them (the political elite), and who protect them (control agencies). Starting from this community of victims,[7] bearers of a 'right to security', the subjects' positions are clearly defined: *We* fear and ask for protection, while *They* threaten us, 'bring decay', offend decorum, and must respect legality. *We* includes both those who have the duty to offer protection and those who ask for it; as the Minister of the Interior declared on the front page of *Corriere della sera*, 'The time for firmness has come. Let us be free from fear' (16 May 2008). Firmness is the only legitimate attitude: 'The best politician, in the field of security, is the one who talks less and starts counting how many uniforms the State has at its disposal and thinking about how to place them on the battlefield to win the war for the right to security' (*la Repubblica*, 20 April 2008).

Disproportion and concern reconsidered

After illustrating how security became a discursive formation and instituted a regime of truth in Italy, I would like to return to the issues left open in the discussion on moral panics and media hypes. As we have seen, the discourse on security and its correlated enunciative field construct the worlds of which they speak and in which social actors operate. This affects the whole organization of society and the way objects are treated, perceived, shaped, and counted.

The search for objective indicators of disproportion – the first of the two questions tackled above – is clearly affected by the changes in this fact-producing apparatus. In the case of security for example, looking for empirical indicators would entail using crime figures. The problems with crime figures are too numerous and complex to be dealt with here. Suffice it to say that the police and the judiciary can adjust their routines, especially when under pressure, to attribute and record certain types of crime more generously – when they want to show their diligence – or less generously – when the aim is to reassure. As well as discretionary, social actors may be productive. When a condition is perceived as disturbing, both citizens and the police will be more willing to denounce and to intervene. All of this affects criminal statistics.

Just how much agencies of control can change their way of operating in times of moral panic is evident in their own communication strategies. In 1994, a coordinated plan to introduce special squads in Italian cities was announced. The aim of these forces was to intervene in areas where 'there is the need to contain episodes linked to petty crime, to drug dealing, and to the presence of *extracomunitari* [non EU citizens] who don't behave according to the rules of civil coexistence' (*Corriere della Sera*, 28 October 1994). In 1999, to make clarify things further, the vice-chief of the police in Milan announced the creation of a special section that would deal

> exclusively with foreign crime. We will have a different approach however: we won't handle cases by type of crime anymore (a robbery to the robbery section, a homicide to the homicide section) but by criminal groups [...] We will take care of the Chinese in their totality, or of what Slavs do, or of the type of criminal behaviour of Albanians (*Corriere della Sera*, 9 May 1999).

In many cities in the 2000s, local police websites began to feature the responsibilities of their urban security departments. They claimed to contend not only with people charged with the illegal or stigmatized behaviours associated with 'urban decay' – such as residing in unauthorized camps, begging, illegal street vending, and windshield washing – but also with inherently problematic people like *extracomunitari* and the inhabitants of 'Roma camps'.

However, moral panics often target deviance that is not yet classified as crime. It is precisely the attempt to bring a behaviour or a group under the arm of the law that is the purpose of moral entrepreneurs. In these cases, we do not have discretion or proactivity, but rather the production of new

offences. Consider, as an example, one of the many ordinances issued by mayors from 2007 onwards, entitled 'Measures Intended to Combat Urban Decay: Anti-mendacity' (Milan, 4 November 2008). It reads:

> Note having been taken of the widespread incidence of begging, practiced in a disagreeable or harassing manner [...] [and] the elimination of this grave danger and threat to public safety and urban security being considered necessary, especially in light of the clear offense such a phenomenon constitutes to public decency and the grave nuisance it poses to the free and normal use of public space, as well as of the escalation of criminality [...] it shall henceforth be illegal [...].

This administrative measure takes on board the equation between marginality and threat to public safety – via offence to public decency – that was one of the main features of the discourse on security, creating a new administrative offence (with many others). The researcher, here, does not have statistics on the matter (although they could become available at this point), but what should she measure? The number of beggars, their dangerousness, how many fines will be finally given? What is disproportion here, if not a matter for social critique?

The typical continuous expansion of perceived threats makes the question 'what should I count?' less important than the close description of what social actors do. When discursive formations create new objects, or subsume old ones under their logic, it is often not the quantity of episodes that matters but the strategies of definition, which operate, to borrow Foucault's metaphor again, as surfaces of emergence. Consider mental illness. Nuts are always the same, the layman could think. But in the year 2008, in order to deal with the problem of mental illness, the municipality of Milan instituted a 'Table for the prevention of social dangerousness' inviting, beside health authorities, three different police forces, empowered to administer a *T.S.O.* (compulsory mental treatment) because 'social dangerousness is directly linked to citizens' need for and perception of security'. This shift in whose is the problem and who should be protected is a definitional move that originates from an overall change of perspective. Although there was no media hype about mental illness, the wide array of similar moves is as much a symptom of underlying modifications of social order as are the hypes and panics that feed on the same transformations.

The battlefield of words is the place where strategic victories take place, while statistics are, at best, just reserves. Moral entrepreneurs of insecurity in Italy got it when they gave up counting crimes and insisted on perceived insecurity instead.

Actually, they did not give up counting; they just changed topic. For opinion polls on 'fear' were the pillars, together with hypes and panics, upon which a wide range of actors built the idea of the flooding of insecurity. From the second half of the 1990s to the end of the 2000s, every few months an opinion poll showing a rise in concern about crime was made public and widely commented upon. What I want to claim now is that widespread concern (and in general public opinion) is more an object of the new discursive formation than a genuine social phenomenon, an 'active' and independent ingredient in moral panics and media hypes.

A few headlines can give the idea of what reading of concern was presented in the mainstream media: 'Crimes go down but people are afraid' (*Corriere della Sera*, 24 February 2001); 'One Italian out of four does not feel safe' (*il Giornale*, 4 April 2003); 'The insecurity of the armoured man' (*la Repubblica*, 27 November 2005); 'Half the country is hostage to fear' (*la Repubblica*, 6 November 2007); 'Italy's Fears' (*la Repubblica*, 9 November 2008). The mass-mediologist is already thinking that this is the result of the media's desire to give the news more impact. But, in fact, the reports of the research institutes who did the polls conveyed the same idea, sometimes even using the same language.

However, if one looks at the only widely used indicator for which a long-term trend is available, the curve is actually rather flat (Figure 1.3).

How could pollsters see a rise in fear everywhere? Even in times when the trend was decreasing, the most general approach[8] was to take a snapshot and comment on how many people felt 'fear', even if many more did not
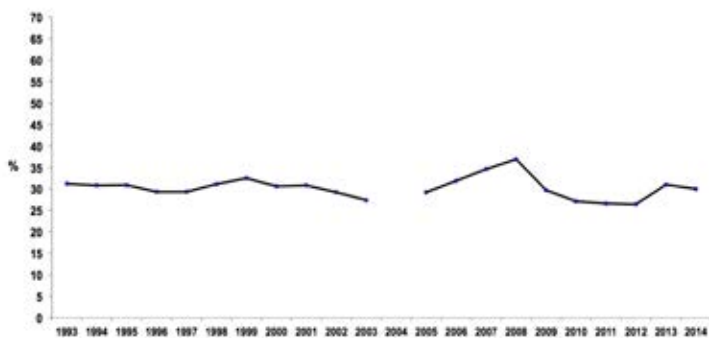

Figure 1.3.   Percentage of people who consider the area where they live 'much' or 'somewhat' at risk of crime, 1993-2014

'fear'. For example, the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), in 2010, commented in its report that 'individual fear regards a high percentage of citizens. 28.9 per cent feels little or not at all safe when they go out alone or it is dark' (ISTAT, 2010). What about the other 71.1 per cent? Do they feel safe? They are so disregarded that they are not even presented in the table. Insecurity, and not confidence, is the hype of the decade.

In times of scarcity, one might think that pollsters do not want to disappoint the media, which are, together with political parties, the most frequent sponsors of this kind of study. They could hardly present the media with a 'no news' finding like 'Security? Nothing to observe'. But ISTAT, unlike other organizations that carry out opinion polls, is a public body and receives no commissions. Nonetheless, its practice is deeply embedded in the power relations that are part of the discursive formation on security. Be it political influence, perceived obligation to study the current social problems, or incorporation of commonsensical ideas and concepts, research institutes tend not only to interpret data in accordance with hegemonic discourse, but also to produce it likewise. For instance, beginning in 1999, just when the hype on urban decay was on the rise, ISTAT started asking its interviewees periodically if they happened to perceive episodes of 'social decay'. The list of episodes includes 'people who take drugs, deal, or leave syringes on the ground', 'beggars and homeless people', 'acts of vandalism against public property', and 'prostitutes looking for clients'. The list matches exactly the new meaning of urban decay that was appearing in media (and political) discourse in the second half of the 1990s (Figure 2.2).

The media, grass-roots activists, main political parties, and experts (including academics, whose publications on urban security closely followed the trend of public discourse)[9] all constructed the same taken-for-granted idea of insecurity. In this context, indicators of public concern, outrage, or fear[10] can no longer be seen as external empirical data, because the new paradigm influences poll commissioning, question framing, respondents' meaning attribution, and pollsters' interpretations. Rather than what people exactly think, close examination of these studies reveals important processes of definition, or the daily crafting of public opinion.

Concluding remarks

I concluded my preliminary discussion of 'public concern' by asking whether it can be seen as a long-lasting consequence of moral panics and media hypes, as a close and volatile mirror of media waves, or as an independent

variable in the process. If we rely on the indicators used in Figures 2.2 and 2.3, we see a 400 per cent increase between the years 2005 and 2007 in the discourse on security – as measured by mentions of the word in the headlines – and a rise in the share of 'concerned' respondents from 29.2 to 36.9 per cent between the years 2005 and 2008. Although the two measurements are not comparable, the two figures seem to suggest that people's opinions followed in far less dramatic a way the media hype on security, but did not last.

However, what this case study intends to illustrate is that public concern – 'insecurity' in our case study – can be better understood as a new approach to definition that affects the everyday practices of a number of interacting social actors. Concern is an activity (of concerned claim makers); a topic (of media discourse); an assumption or a legitimizing argument (for politicians); and a new trendy topic (for experts). Above all, concern, fear, and outrage should be seen as rhetoric, and as a performance whose social power lies in its being made public. The role of the media in the reification of concern is of utmost importance. Whether they speak as champions of 'civil society', quote or promote public opinion polls, publish timely interviews of concerned people, refer to specific complaints, petitions, or reactions using generalizations like 'the city', 'the neighbourhood', 'the people', what the media do is to construct a simulacrum of public opinion, to which politicians and experts promptly respond. Opinion polls could appear to confirm public fear only because they were part of the regime of truth established within the discursive formation on security. Concern, in this context, cannot be distinguished from the new language used to talk about urban security. A language that promotes fear as a framework for understanding and talking about a growing array of topics, borrowing a perspective already well-established in the United States (Glassner, 1999; Altheide, 2002).

Something very similar can be said about 'disproportion'. The discretion, proactivity, or re-organization of control agencies add to the inflation of the cases that will show up in crime figures. By the same token, the securitization of the problem brings an expansion of the behaviours classified under its umbrella, creating new objects or re-framing older ones. In more general terms, the whole field changes under the scope of the new discursive formation: the actual behaviours as well as how they are perceived, treated, and classified. The identification of a threat rests on a shifting ground of definitions and is a matter of definition itself.

In this situation, the call to examine external empirical indicators in order to assess the nature of media representations and social reactions – to establish whether they are reasonable answers or 'just moral panics'/ 'the

usual media hypes' – is extremely difficult to answer, and it can even be misleading. In social sciences, empirical indicators are used when they appear, after careful examination, to be valid, i.e. to be grounded in the real phenomenon the researcher wants to observe. If they are found to measure something else, either the indicator or the concept is reformulated. Similarly, in the case of repeated media hypes and moral panics, if the ground is so mobile that external indicators seem to measure, more than anything, processes of definition and of attribution, they should be conceived as such.

This should not be seen as a defeat of the scientific enterprise, because in these cases the enquiry on the nature and the strategies of meaning-making is the most straightforward and consequent research approach. The dynamic of news waves and the criteria of selection and framing, the intensity and symbolic degree of politicians' and public officials' reaction, the spreading of disaster metaphors and emotive language – all of this is empirical data that can give an accurate picture of what is going on.

It is tempting to argue that this programme represents a departure from the study of reality, engaging self-indulgently with the deconstruction of discourse. But discourse is part of reality and has a deep influence, as we have seen, on social practices that affect the lives of many people. In addition, the analysis of discursive processes does not exclude, and instead must be combined with, the study of external empirical indicators, as long as the latter are seen in their interaction with the forces that mould them. More investigation needs to be done in this respect, as opinion polls and official statistics are too often taken at face value, instead of being analysed for what they are: interactive kinds,[11] the outcome of social scientific classifications that become material realities, embedded in social practice and interacting with human objects and institutions through looping effects. Data record while they create, and are significantly modified according to the definitional practices prevailing at a given time. Those who collect data, adopting these changing definitions and their emphases, are part of society themselves and deeply involved in its power-knowledge relations. This is true for the scholar as well, who can no longer claim to stay outside reality, looking in. Nevertheless, she can confront dominant discourses starting from a different standpoint. Which has the advantage of questioning taken for granted ideas, instead of relying on them.

Notes

1.   This exposure culminated in the declaration of a State of Emergency in relation to Roma settlements on 21 May 2008.

2.   Romania was already part of the EU, so the Decree was illegitimate and was never converted into a Law.
3.   *Corriere on line*, 5 March, quoted in Naletto (2009).
4.   The Decree was converted into a Law on 23 April 2009.
5.   Calculating the sum of the two terms and considering solely those meanings that were tied to immigration as illustrated below.
6.   For an analysis of the discursive and social dynamics of that short circuit, see Maneri (1998).
7.   For the central role of victims in contemporary discourse of fear, see Garland (2001), Altheide (2002), and Simon (2008).
8.   For a more detailed analysis of opinion polls on security in Italy, see Maneri (2013b).
9.   See Maneri (2013b) on how the cross-correlation between the trend of the use of the word in the media and of the keyword 'urban security' in the academic database Google Scholar is very close, with the academic trend lagging the media trend by two to three years. Exactly how scholars talked about urban security is another question, which would benefit from critical analysis. The scholars who appeared frequently in the media, however, clearly echoed the dominant framework.
10.   The distinction between concern about crime, fear of crime, and opinions about crime was never considered in mediatized polls and only rarely in public opinion research reports.
11.   I am borrowing the expression introduced by Hacking (2000), although with a different application.

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