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Neo-Nazis and moral panic: The emergence of neo-Nazi youth gangs in Israel

Revital Sela-Shayovitz^{1,2}

Abstract

The emergence of a neo-Nazi gang is an unprecedented manifestation of deviance in Israel. It has undermined the moral order and shaken the delicate nerves of Israeli society, which lives in the shadow of the Holocaust. Drawing principally on Israeli newspaper coverage, the study examines the dynamics of social discourse among policymakers, the press and pressure groups. The analysis shows that initial formulations of moral panic derived from a profound concern about changes in the social and moral order of society due to immigration. Moreover, conceptually situated within theorizations of moral risk, this moral panic was a temporary rupture in processes of moral regulation and served governing agents, which increased social control by constructing risks and dangers.

Keywords

immigrants, moral panic, neo-Nazi, skinheads, social control, youth gangs

The recent uncovering of a neo-Nazi gang was an unprecedented manifestation of juvenile deviance in Israel, which has aroused anxiety and undermined the moral order and delicate nerves of a society living in the shadow of the Holocaust. This episode elicited poignant questions, such as: 'How is it possible that neo-Nazi activity is taking place in the Jewish state?'

On 9 September 2007, Israel police arrested eight immigrant youths from the former USSR who were suspected of belonging to a neo-Nazi gang by the name of 'Patrol 36'. The police investigation revealed that gang members had brutally attacked foreign workers, drug addicts, homosexuals, and religious Jews. In conversations with each other, members of the gang had saluted '*Heil Hitler*' and had threatened to annihilate the Jews. In addition, the police found in their homes pictures of gang members dressed in Nazi uniforms, raising their hands in the Nazi salute, as well as links to websites of neo-Nazi groups and neo-Nazi films. Nearly a year after they were arrested, members of the gang were given prison sentences ranging from one to seven years (23 November 2008, *Ma'ariv*).

The facilitating conditions of a sensitive public audience and the new form of deviance were exploited by a sensationalist mass media, and provoked a collective 'emotional effervescence' in

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Israeli society. Moreover, the neo-Nazi gang shook the very moral foundations of society and posed a challenge to the government. The episode gave rise to heated social discourse, which related to underlying social and cultural conflicts in society. This paper aims to contribute to the existing literature by establishing evidence for the existence of a moral panic around neo-Nazi youth gangs in Israel, and then conducting an analysis of the role of moral panic, as well as shedding light on the way this panic serves for moral regulation through construction of risk and dangers. The analysis is based on contemporary studies of the topic, and focuses on the cultural sources of moral panic, as well as the role of moral panic and the discursive dynamics among policymakers, the press, pressure groups and politicians (Ajzenstadt, 2009; Garland, 2008; Hier, 2003; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995).

By way of introduction, and to elucidate the theoretical frameworks of this research, I begin by reviewing the literature on moral panic. Subsequently, I present a brief description of the substantial body of work on neo-Nazi skinhead subcultures. Additionally, since the Israeli neo-Nazis chose affiliation with neo-Nazis in Russia (their country of origin), and maintained the interaction via the Internet, I elaborate the discussion on the effect of the Internet on the spread of the neo-Nazi movement in Eastern Europe and Russia. I also provide theoretical background on the social, cultural and political context of Israeli society that fostered the moral panic elicited by the neo-Nazi gang. Based on Hall's (1997) concept of discourse as that which constructs knowledge and meaning, the study employed the discourse analysis strategy to explore the role of the moral panic within the sociopolitical power relations and historical context. Data were drawn from newspaper coverage from the time following the arrests of the gang members and during their sentencing. The analysis of the construction of moral panic focuses on four dimensions: the path of formation of the moral panic; social introspection and moral contesting; risk and deterrence; and mechanisms for re-establishing the moral order. The examination reveals that the moral panic was rooted in significant changes in the sociopolitical structure and culture of Israeli society. Finally, in the discussion section, the findings will be analysed in terms of a critical conception of ideology, risk and moral regulation and conceptually situated within a broader sociopolitical, cultural and historical context.

Moral Panic and Social Control

Following Cohen's (1972) classic pioneering work on 'Mods and Rockers', the concept of moral panic has been well established and extensively studied. Moreover, moral panic has become embedded in social policy discussions and widely used by the mass media, since it fits the components of fear and entertainment of the news format (Altheide, 2009; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995). Moral panic has been characterized as a feeling of anxiety and emotional energy, which is aroused in response to a crime that is thought to be abnormal, or as a result of the emergence of a new kind of offence (Cromer, 2004). Such arousal of exaggerated anxiety and emotional energy has typically focused on gang activities, youth deviance, satanic kidnapping of children, illicit drug use, pornography and prostitution (Ben-Yehuda, 2009; Garland, 2008). Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) defined five key features of moral panic: it arouses societal *concern* and *hostility* towards a deviant group; there is a general societal *consensus* that the behaviour is harmful; there is a *disproportionate* societal interpretation or reaction to the phenomenon; and the panic is typified by *volatility*.

Social changes in a society can frequently generate profound concerns among the public, which are subsequently transformed into moral panic. Thus, the initial formulations of moral panic arise

out of major moral disturbances that are rooted in significant changes in the structure and values of society (Cohen, 1972; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Young, 2008). Moreover, moral panic involves cultural conflicts, and can be used to formulate resistance, provocation, resentment, and outrage when the subculture threatens the moral order of the dominant group (Young, 2009). In periods of social crises and conflicts, moral panic may serve as a strategy of the ruling elite, which is able to 'orchestrate hegemony' by manipulating the media to mystify or re-articulate the crisis (Hall et al., 1978).

In Cohen's assessment, every moral panic has its folk devil: a person or group on to which public anxieties are projected. This trigger group is not chosen by accident; rather, the folk devil is chosen as the focus of moral panic because it is closely related to the source of anxiety (Young, 2009). The trigger group only comes to symbolize a threat when moral entrepreneurs make claims regarding its problematic behaviour, which is subsequently publicized by the media (Hier, 2008). In contrast to the classic models, which distinguished between the media, politics, and social control, recent approaches have contended that most political strategies tend to be manifested as media strategies, and that the relationship between processes of claims-making and social control is far less circumscribed than the classic models recognized (Hier, 2002, 2008; McRobbie & Thornton 1995; Ungar 2001). Additionally, in multicultural societies where morality is constantly contested and negotiated, there might be a reduction in the number of moral panics, or the moral panic might be on a smaller scale. Moral panic can be launched by a variety of moral entrepreneurs, who may advocate for the moral perceptions of different cultural groups (Ben-Yehuda, 2009). Recent studies have found that a diverse range of social reactions and heterogeneous media outlets are involved in the construction and contestation of moral panic. Thus, the media serves not only as a social space where political projects are constituted and constructed; it is also a space where political agendas are contested and reconfigured (Hier, 2002, 2008; Parnaby, 2003).

Modern theories of risk have conceptualized moral panic within the framework of moral risk theories. Social discourse on risk management focuses on the harm that irresponsible others pose to the values of the society, and responds to the demand for drastic action. According to this approach, types of everyday issues, which pose a risk to society, render as subsidiary the exceptional anxieties commonly attributed to moral panics (Cricher, 2009; Ungar, 2001). However, the definition of people or situations as posing a risk and danger to society is rooted in a sociohistorical context, and in the impact of this context on cultural values and norms (Ajzenstadt, 2009; O'Malley, 1992). Hier (2002) contended that moral panic is a temporary rupture in routine processes of moral regulation, which occurs when moral regulation is perceived as being in a state of failure or dislocation. Moreover, the process of moral regulation occurs when social agents problematize aspects of the conduct, values, or culture of others on moral grounds, and seek to impose moral regulations in order to increase social control. Thus, moral panic serves as a technique of moral regulation, which governing agents exploit through the discursive construction of a set of risks and dangers (Hier, 2002; Hunt, 1999).

Neo-Nazi and Skinhead Movements

The emergence of the neo-Nazi movement in Germany in the late 1960s, along with the rise of other extreme right-wing movements, is related to social circumstances of political dissatisfaction and economic crisis (Zafer-Smith, 2003). However, one of the key factors for the expansion of

these movements is the influx of immigrants, who were viewed as an economic and cultural threat endangering Western values and social cohesion (Heitmeyer & Hagan, 2003; McGowan, 2006). Right-wing extremist orientations (such as racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism) are characterized by ideologies of unequal worth and hostile attitude that merge with approval and willingness to use violence against those perceived as enemies (Sitzer and Heitmeyer, 2008: 169).

The skinheads, who can be thought of as a subgroup of the global neo-Nazi movement, were 'reborn' in the late 1970s in Great Britain, following the emergence of the punk scene (Corte & Edwards, 2008). Scholars have noted that some aspects of punk facilitated the regeneration of the skinheads' style, such as criticism and hostility toward upper-middle-class standards. This viewpoint matches the skinheads' concern with the increase of youth unemployment and mistrust of the government (Hamm, 1993; Griffin & Feldman, 2004). In the early 1980s, the skinheads slowly adopted the ideology of white supremacy and the new-Nazi subculture. 'White Power heavy metal' music has a central role in spreading this racist ideology. Corte and Edwards (2008) explored how the ideas of 'White Power' music consistently match right-wing extremist rhetoric. Hence, this music seems to be a provocative propaganda tool for spreading neo-Nazi ideology. Moreover, the lyrics of the music glorify gang culture, such as stressing tough and aggressive behaviour, in which membership can bring excitement and the status of belonging (Corte & Edwards, 2008; Griffin & Feldman, 2004; Hamm 1993). Findings show that the preference of this music is significantly related to neo-Nazi ideology, a subculture of alcohol intoxication and criminal behaviour (Hamm, 2004).

Several theories were offered to explain the causal process that leads young people to engage with youth skinhead gangs and to commit hate violence crimes. These theories included a range of factors, including individual, cultural, structural and social psychological (Corte & Edwards, 2008; Hamm, 1993, 2004; Kates 1988). However, the dominant factors that interweave in this dynamic process usually relate to a working-class background and an obsession with weapons, which are affected by the powerful impact of White Power music and the semi-military style of the subculture (e.g., shaved or closely cropped hair, white power regalia) (Hamm, 2004). Thus, the combined effect of these elements leads the youths to identify with white supremacy ideology, triggers their emotions and excitement, and energizes them to become violent against their perceived enemies (Hamm, 2004).

The Internet is also a key factor in the global diffusion of neo-Nazi ideology, mainly through White Power music. Indeed, White Power music has become accessible to a greater variety of youth through websites that sell music, which are greatly expanding its market niche and profitability (Back, 2002). However, it is important to note that the Internet not only enables individuals to broadcast this racial ideology, but also becomes a forum, which provides an opportunity for interaction and dialogue between skinheads around the globe to shape a global skinhead culture. The existence of websites, chat rooms and newsgroups dedicated to skinheads allow discussing and negotiating white supremacy ideology and identity of the gangs (Campbell 2006). Having delineated the framework of the neo-Nazi skinhead subculture, the following discussion elaborates on the expansion of this movement in Eastern Europe.

Neo-Nazi Skinheads in Eastern Europe

The rapid political, social and economic changes in Eastern Europe following the fall of communism in 1989 are closely related to the rise of the extreme right in the form of a wide spectrum of

organizations, such as political parties and the neo-Nazi skinheads (Mudde, 2005). At the same time, cultural globalization processes also have a major impact on the expansion of the skinheads subculture in Eastern Europe by developing transnational links in every state across varying social and economic circumstances, mainly through White Power music, as already mentioned (Griffin & Feldman, 2004). Furthermore, during the first post-communist decade, many Eastern Europe countries enjoyed relative freedom and, to a certain extent, low social control, which in turn allowed the rise of skinhead movements and in some cases higher levels of militancy (Mudde, 2005). Within Russia, the formation of the skinheads in the early 1990s is related to several circumstances, such as economic hardship, breakdown of the Soviet education system, an ideological shift from leftist to more fascist views of nationalist objectives, and xenophobia towards the large wave of immigrants from the former republics of the Soviet Union (Shashking, 2008; Shenfield, 2001). Initially, the skinheads were centred mainly in Moscow. However, over the last decade they have spread to all large and medium-sized cities in Russia. The Russian skinheads are considered a large movement (about 50,000 people) and are highly violence-prone. In 2008, the SOVA association recorded 515 racist attacks, 96 of which were fatal (Laruelle, 2009; Mitrokhin, 2006). In general, Russian skinhead ideology has mainly adopted the traditional skinhead ideas of hostility toward immigrants, radical nationalism and manifest violence against people who belong to non-Slavic ethnic groups. Further potential targets are other youth subcultures such as rappers or members of left-wing political organizations and, above all, anarchists. This local version of skinhead subculture maintained ties to Western skinhead groups via the Internet posting on Front 18's website (Shashking, 2008; Sokolove, 2008).

Immigrants from the Former USSR in Israel

The first wave of Russian immigrants arrived in Israel during the early 1970s, while the huge wave of immigrants came during the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. These two waves of immigrants differ mainly in their motivation for absorption and their linkage to Judaism. The motivation of the immigrants in the first wave was viewed as ideological, namely Zionism, and they had stronger links to Judaism, whereas the motivation of the second wave was more of a pragmatic cost-benefit consideration and they were less linked to Judaism (Al-Haj, 2004; Leshem and Shuval, 1998). Since the dissolution of the USSR, about 1,100,000 immigrants have arrived in Israel from the former Soviet republics (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2006). This massive wave of immigration was partly due to Israeli policy, which seeks to absorb as many Jewish immigrants as possible. Consequently, the Israeli government actively encouraged and assisted Jewish immigrants to move to Israel (Cohen & Kogan, 2002). Immigration from the former USSR has been perceived as successful because most of these immigrants had high levels of education and professional skills, and could compete successfully in the labour market. As such, the wave of migration from the former USSR has had an impact on Israeli society at various levels—political, social, economic, cultural, and religious (Al-Haj & Leshem, 2000; Remennick, 2002; Smooha, 2008). However, it is estimated that about one-third of the people from the former USSR who immigrated to Israel in consequence of the Law of Return were not Jewish according to *Halakhic* (Jewish religious) law. The Israeli Law of Return was enacted on 5 July 1950 by the Knesset, Israel's Parliament. This law is one of the fundamental laws in Israeli society, which defines Israel as a Jewish state that was established for the Jewish people and constitutes the legal foundation for

immigration to the state of Israel (State of Israel Knesset: 1950). The law combines aspects of history, religion and nationalism in a way unique to Israel, which together grants Jews the right to immigrate to Israel. The Law of Return declares that Israel constitutes a home not only for the inhabitants of the state, but also for all members of the Jewish people everywhere—whether they live in fear of persecution or in affluence and safety. Hence, according to the law, Jewish immigrants from the diaspora are unconditionally entitled to Israeli citizenship, with the aim of facilitating their immigration to Israel (State of Israel Knesset: 1950). As of 1970, this definition was expanded to include immigrants with at least one Jewish grandparent, as well as non-Jewish spouses and dependent children of Jewish immigrants (Cohen & Kogan, 2007).

However, although non-Jewish immigrants are entitled to the same privileges granted to every Jewish immigrant, they have been less welcomed by the religious public, because they are perceived as a threat to the Jewish demographic composition of Israeli society (Wohlgeleenter, 1999). The demographic threat provided the impetus for public debate regarding the Law of Return, and has become a key issue in Israeli society. In the context of this debate, two proposals based on two different approaches have been proposed by policymakers, to amend or abolish the Law of Return. Each of these proposals would have had serious potential consequences for the State of Israel. Some of the left-leaning Knesset members, who believe that Israel must become a multicultural state, argued that the law is undemocratic, and that granting automatic citizenship to members of one specific religion is problematic. Therefore, they proposed to abolish the Law of Return and enact legislation that would promote pluralism and multiculturalism (Altschul, 2003). In contrast, right-leaning Knesset members, particularly from the religious parties, proposed to abolish the entitlement to automatic citizenship for immigrants with at least one Jewish grandparent, and sought to add an amendment requiring all converts to Judaism who immigrate as Jews under the Law of Return to undergo Orthodox conversions. This legislation would have primarily impacted Jews of questionable religious status from the former Soviet Union. If enacted, it would have conflicted with Israel's mission to be a home and haven for world Jewry (Altschul, 2003; Gilbert, 2000; Sachar, 1999).

Data and Analytical Approach

The basic assumption of this study was that major newspapers provide a discursive space in which political agendas are constituted and reconfigured (Hier, 2008; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995). Furthermore, the discursive discourse in the media defines and produces the objects of our knowledge, and it is the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked and reasoned about (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Foucault, 1972; Hall, 1997). Thus, the study examines the discursive discourse in newspaper coverage in order to explore and to formulate the moral panic in terms of a critical conception of ideology, risk and moral regulation (Ajzenstadt, 2009; Garland, 2008; Hier, 2003; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995). The analysis was divided into two parts. First, the examination aimed to scrutinize evidence for the existence of moral panic surrounding the neo-Nazi gang by applying the key defining concepts of moral panic: concern, hostility, societal consensus, *disproportion* and volatility (see Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Second, the study employed the discourse analysis approach, which focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, and challenge relations of power and dominance in society (Van Dijk, 2001). The analysis was based on the concept of discourse analysis which takes into account four levels: (1) the immediate

language in the headlines and the internal text; (2) the language that individuals use in the discourse as members of social groups, organizations or institutions; (3) social actions of individual actors are thus a constituent part of social groups (such as legislation of moral regulations or news-making); (4) the context of the situation within broader sociopolitical and historical context (Van Dijk, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

Data

The analysis related to all articles (72 reports) regarding neo-Nazi youths in Israel published in the three widest circulating newspapers in Israel in the period from 9 September 2007 (when the members of the neo-Nazi gang were arrested) to 31 December 2008 (following sentencing of the gang members). These daily newspapers (*Yedi'ot Aharonot*, *Ma'ariv*, and *Ha'aretz*) are privately owned and represent general public opinion in Israel (Dor, 2001; Sela-Shayovitz, 2007). By analysing articles from different sources we ensured a broader range of coverage of the neo-Nazi phenomenon and at the same time addressed the selection bias (Earl et al., 2004). Furthermore, it allowed us to analyse coverage processes from a wide array of 'voices' in society. The data was compiled through an electronic archives search (using key words such as neo-Nazi, Patrol 36, youth gang) and hard copies of the press. By using both types of search we were able to capture a fuller range of this episode (e.g., the electronic search was liable to miss some of the reports that were framed in unusual ways).

The findings related to most of the themes that became evident in the data. The presentation of the results was divided into four broad categories: the path of formation of the moral panic; social introspection and moral contesting; risk and deterrence; and mechanisms for re-establishing the moral order.

The Path of Formation of the Moral Panic

Following the uncovering of a new form of deviance in Israeli society, i.e. the neo-Nazi youth gang, a sudden eruption of social concern and excessive feeling of fear was observed. The comprehensive reports of the youth gang appeared for several days in the headlines of the evening news broadcasts on all major television channels, as well as on the front pages of the three main newspapers. The media outlets flooded the public with alarming reports with horrifying giant headlines, including: 'Home-grown Neo-Nazism' (10 September 2007, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*), 'A Party for Hitler at *Yad Labanim* [soldiers' memorial organization]' (10 September 2007, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*), and 'Swastikas on the Walls of a Synagogue' (14 September 2007, *Ma'ariv*). Moreover, pictures of gang members dressed in Nazi uniforms, their bodies tattooed with Nazi symbols and their hands raised in the '*Heil Hitler*' salute were displayed in all the media. Thus, the discovery of a new form of deviance, along with public sensitivity following the impact of the Holocaust, were utilized by the sensationalist mass media which aroused a collective 'emotional effervescence', as in other instances of moral panic (see Garland, 2008). In addition, the fact that the episode also received wide coverage in Europe created a sense of embarrassment and discomfort in Israel. But, although the press coverage was sensationalist, the fear that it expressed might be genuine, since it was a unique form of danger to the Jewish society that had assumed itself free of the threat of anti-Semitism. However, issues like this that have been successfully constructed as threats to the

moral order are more likely to become moral panics, as Young (2005: 102) argued: 'You cannot have a moral panic unless there is something out there.'

Public concern and fear was also evident in the official reaction. Immediately after the arrest of the gang, the government held a special meeting and the chief commissioner of the police presented a report on how the police were handling the episode. He indicated that this was one of the most serious deviations investigated in Israel in recent years (9 October 2007, *Ma'ariv*). In this context, it is important to note that government special meetings on youth deviance in Israel are infrequent. Israeli government ministers utilized the episode as an opportunity to hold interviews in the media, and contributed to the emotional uproar by intensifying the threat posed by the neo-Nazis. The Minister of Homeland Security, Avi Dichter said: 'The pictures we have seen are terrifying. I'm terrified as a person, and especially as the son of a Holocaust survivor. When I saw the films the thought came to my mind that, God forbid, there could be other incidents like this in Israel' (10 September 2007, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*).

In the same vein with other moral panics, this case aroused the adult generation's sense of anxiety, as well as threats to socialization and social control of the younger generation. Indeed, youth deviance seems to be one of the major foci of moral panics (Ben-Yehuda, 2009; Burns & Crawford, 1999; Cohen, 1972; Cromer, 2004).

A scholar of youth violence argued that 'the neo-Nazi youth was the tip of the iceberg when it came to problems relating to the younger generation in Israel, who have lost their connection with the state and its values' (10 September 2007, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*). Furthermore, a senior supervisor in the Ministry of Education reported that this was not an isolated case, and that recent evidence has revealed an intensification of the phenomenon of youth engaging in neo-Nazi activities (10 September 2007, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*). However, no substantial evidence was found for increasing involvement of youth in neo-Nazi activities in Israel. Thus, the social reaction was featured by exaggeration and *disproportion* of concern regarding youth engagement in neo-Nazi activities.

The social discourse emphasized that moral panic also derived from public concern about globalization and its social impact on the younger generation. Moral entrepreneurs argued that the development of neo-Nazi ideology in Israel was mainly due to the impact of the Internet on the younger generation. Social concern about the impact of the Internet has also been linked to other manifestations of moral panic, such as panic generated by paedophiles (Critchler, 2002). However, the criticism focused on Israeli society's failure to control the content that the young generation is exposed to on the Internet. Investigation of the neo-Nazi episode revealed that the youth gang managed a website on which they publicized neo-Nazi ideology and showed clips that were filmed when the victims were being attacked. In addition, it has been argued that neo-Nazi propaganda is also disseminated on the YouTube website as well as on the Format 18 website, which is considered to be an extreme neo-Nazi website in Russia (12 September 2007, *Ha'aretz*). An education expert contended that the dissemination of Nazi ideology on Internet forums highlights the need to control the content and ideas that the young generation is exposed to (8 June 2008, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*).

The official reaction was characterized by *societal consensus* that this behaviour is harmful and poses a risk to the moral order of society. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's response was: 'I'm sure no one will remain indifferent to these difficult sights. These acts are evidence that as a society, we have failed in educating these young people, and have not succeeded in distancing them from

wild and dangerous ideologies' (9 September 2007, *Ha'aretz*). The public discourse also reflected the societal *consensus* that 'something must be done' in order to prevent this deviance. For example, two days after the exposure of the gang, the Minister of Education, Yuli Tamir, sent out a directive to the principals of primary and intermediate schools, requiring them to hold discussions and to condemn neo-Nazi activity (11 September 2007, *Ha'aretz*). The discussion of this aspect will be elaborated in the section on risk and deterrence.

The media coverage emphasised the *hostility* expressed by various political and social groups towards the neo-Nazi youths, who were stereotypically portrayed as folk devils. They were referred to as 'hooligans and lunatics' (10 September 2007, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*), 'anti-Semites and haters of Israel' (25 September 2007, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*), 'moral criminals' (5 October 2007, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*), and 'violent bullies with Nazi ideology' (5 October 2007, *Ma'ariv*). In the same vein, the vandalism committed by the gang at synagogues and the severe acts of violence perpetrated against innocent victims received extensive coverage in the newspapers. Hence, the portrayal of the neo-Nazis as folk devils was integrated into the social construction of the gang as a risk and danger to the moral foundations of society. Furthermore, the stigmatization of the neo-Nazi youth as folk devils and outsiders was clearly expressed through the emphasis of their religious identity: the members of the gang were not Jews, and they had immigrated to Israel under the Law of Return. Therefore, they belonged to a group that was on the margins of Israeli society, and their ability to cope with the accusations and stigma was limited (Becker, 1963; Garland, 2008). Thus, by highlighting the neo-Nazi youths' religious identity and drawing a distinct boundary between them and Jewish society, the media led to social exclusion and construction of 'otherness' to assure that the individuals involved were not identified with Judaism, nor were they raised in that tradition. As scholars have pointed out, coverage of social exclusion and 'otherness' is often linked to social problems or violent crime, and the criminals are perceived as 'enemies within' who pose a tangible threat to society (Greer & Jewkes, 2005; Brand & Greenberg, 1994; Hall, 1997).

The findings presented above established evidence for the existence of a moral panic around the neo-Nazi youth gang. The manifestation of a new form of deviance in Israeli society evokes social reaction that seems to fit the criteria of a moral panic (concern, hostility, consensus and disproportion), as well as a definite moral dimension. Furthermore, the social concern tended to subside following the sentencing of the gang members. Hence, this moral panic seems to be *volatile*. Having delineated the characteristics of the moral panic, the following discussion elaborates on the social introspective soul-searching reaction that accompanied this episode.

Social Introspection and Moral Contesting

It seems that the alarm generated by the gang was largely due to the widespread feeling that this was a symptom of the fundamental and intensifying problems that were plaguing Israeli society. Initially, the media gave oppositional voices a public forum for the criticism of government policies. The social discourse indicated that the neo-Nazi gang only came to symbolize a threat when moral entrepreneurs from different social groups made claims regarding the deviant behaviour (Hier, 2008). Thus, the media projected diverse reactions in the construction and contestation of moral panic (Hier, 2002; Parnaby, 2003).

Some of the claims-makers contended that government policy and Israeli society were the ones who contributed to the emergence of the deviant behaviour. In their view, the neo-Nazi activity

was fostered by the Israeli government's cruel and alienating treatment of weak social groups such as elderly people and Holocaust survivors, as well as by the prevailing atmosphere of discord, racism and conflict in Israeli society (28 September 2007, *Ha'aretz*). Notably, during the half-year that preceded the exposure of the neo-Nazi gang, there was broad public discourse about the distress of Holocaust survivors. The State Comptroller's report for that year revealed that 30 per cent of Holocaust survivors in Israel lived in poverty, and were in medical and social distress (2 July 2007, *Ha'aretz*). There was extensive media coverage of the difficult situation of the Holocaust survivors, and the government was criticized for neglecting its moral obligation to look after their welfare. Other moral entrepreneurs argued that neo-Nazi activity was a symptom of the problem of violence in Israeli society in general. Politicians from leftist parties emphasized that the violence generated by the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians was generalized to Israeli society at large. Thus, they claimed that the severe violence perpetrated by the neo-Nazi gang against its victims was an outcome of the violence perpetrated by the state against Arab residents, as well as an outcome of violence within the family, in the streets, and in schools (12 September 2007, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*). Moreover, Arab politicians from various parties argued that the existence of the gang was an outcome of the Israeli government's discrimination against Israeli Arabs. Arab Knesset Member Ahmad Tibi claimed: 'The gang is a natural outcome of the racist policy implemented by the Israeli government against Arab citizens of Israel. The racist ideology of the neo-Nazi gang fits in well with the racist atmosphere of Israeli society' (9 September 2007, *Ma'ariv*). Hence, the social discourse demonstrated how moral entrepreneurs, who may advocate the moral perceptions of different cultural groups, seized this opportunity to advance agendas that may not have been directly tied to the group in question.

However, the fact that members of the neo-Nazi gang were immigrants from the former USSR immediately provoked public debate about the process of absorbing immigrants in Israel and the way that new immigrants were treated in Israeli society—a debate that reflected the cultural conflicts between Israeli society and new immigrants from the former USSR.

An expert on migration processes argued that the neo-Nazi youths were protesting the rejection, frustration, and deprivation that they encountered in the process of absorption (9 September 2007, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*). It was claimed that the Israeli government has ignored the distress experienced by these immigrants (10 September 2007, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*). Notably, the criticism was directed not only at the Israeli government, but also at the hostile attitude of Israeli society towards the immigrants: 'Clearly, these young people did not come from Russia with a Nazi consciousness. Rather, they developed this horrifying madness as a direct result of discrimination, racism, and resentment that many people in Israeli society have shown towards the Russian immigration from the beginning' (14 September 2007, *Ma'ariv*). Immigrants from the former USSR contested the sense of rejection they felt as a result of the condescending way in which Israel treated them, and the prejudice that they encountered: 'If the Israelis say that we are non-Jews and whores—and that's what a lot of Israelis, including Knesset members and ministers, say about immigrants from Russia despite the tremendous contribution of these immigrants to Israeli society—and we attack the skullcap wearers (religious Jews), since they are the leaders of the racism against us' (12 September 2007, *Ma'ariv*). The existence of counter-experts who contest claims on behalf of the folk devils fit the latter concept, which suggested that folk devils and oppositional groups have the ability to respond and to make claims in the public sphere (McRobbie & Thornton 1995; Hier 2002). Furthermore, against that background, it can be argued that although the moral panic centred on the neo-Nazi youth as folk

devils, they only serve as an embodiment of a deeper social problem. This problem derives from Israel's transition from a predominantly Jewish society to a multicultural society.

Thus, it seems that this moral panic was a manifestation of resistance, resentment, and even provocation. The young immigrants, who sought to express their resentment against the culture of the host country, succeeded in undermining and threatening the moral foundations of the dominant group, i.e., Israeli-born Jews. However, they not only rejected Israeli society by associating themselves with anti-Semitic ideology, but they were also declaring their ethnic affiliation with Russian ultra-nationalists and neo-Nazis.

Risk and Deterrence

The public discourse on risk management aimed to amplify the harm posed by the neo-Nazi gang to the moral order, and also intensified demands to enforce tougher and drastic sanctions against gang members. The immediate demand was to revoke the Israeli citizenship of the neo-Nazi gang members and deport them. This demand was made by the Minister of Trade and Industry, Eli Yishai, and Minister of the Interior, Meir Shitrit (10 September 2007, *Ma'ariv*). The media played an active role in inciting hostility and intensifying public pressure to deport the gang members, as evidenced in the following headline: 'Deport Anti-Semites' (10 September 2007, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*).

Notably, the demand to deport the neo-Nazi gang was unprecedented as a response to criminal deviance in Israel. Israeli law does not permit the deportation of citizens, except in cases of crimes involving disloyalty to the state. Moreover, the neo-Nazi youths were not citizens of any country other than Israel, so they could not be deported unless another country was willing to grant them political asylum (16 December 2007, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*).

In response to public pressure, the State Attorney's Office formulated a proposal to revoke the citizenship of the neo-Nazi gang members and deport them from Israel after serving a prison sentence. According to that proposal, the gang members would be able to shorten their prison sentence in exchange for waiving their Israeli citizenship (17 December 2007, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*). However, the proposal was rejected and the district court sentenced the gang members to prison terms ranging from one to seven years. The court decision reflects the social perception that the neo-Nazi gang was a danger to Israeli society, particularly against the historical background of the Holocaust. The court decision stated that 'this is a grievous, horrifying, outrageous phenomenon, and the events are reminiscent of the dark period of Kristallnacht ... no citizen of the State of Israel can reconcile the gravity of the phenomenon that was discovered, and there is no way of being lenient with the perpetrators. The gravity of the incident and the need for due retribution that will deter others from perpetrating such acts cancels out the fact that the perpetrators are young' (23 November 2008, *Ma'ariv*). However, it seems that in the social discourse that was projected in the media, this dangerous group was judged in advance of the court decision. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the court decision was based on zero tolerance, and severe punishments were meted out as retribution and deterrence.

Mechanisms for Re-establishing the Moral Order

Further examination reveals that as long as the moral panic prevailed, the diverse range of social reactions was replaced with discourse that was deliberately engineered for political gain. The

social discourse indicates that this panic was rooted in the core culture of Jewish identity, and in the debate regarding the Law of Return. As such, governing agents used moral panic to enforce moral regulation through the social construction of the neo-Nazi gang as risky and dangerous (see Hier, 2002). Specifically, the social construction of the gang aimed to generalize the risk that its members posed to Israeli society at large as non-Jewish immigrants from the former USSR. As part of that process, government ministers and other politicians from religious parties began to exploit the episode as a means of promoting their political agenda to change the Law of Return. The Minister of Interior, Meir Shitrit, appointed a commission to investigate whether the families of the neo-Nazi youths had presented false documents attesting to their Jewish religious affiliation when they immigrated to Israel (8 September 2007, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*). The investigation revealed that the families had immigrated to Israel under the Law of Return, and that their documents were valid. In a similar vein, moral entrepreneurs also claimed that some non-Jewish immigrants had received permission to immigrate to Israel by deception. It was claimed that these immigrants posed a risk, they had failed to integrate into society, they did not understand Hebrew, and they did not perceive themselves as part of the country (9 September 2007, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*). In response, the Ministry of Interior announced that the criteria for approving immigration to Israel would be tightened, and that requests to immigrate to Israel under the Law of Return would be reconsidered in cases where applicants had converted to Judaism abroad (10 September 2007, *Ha'aretz*).

Analysis of the social discourse reveals that the main goal of constructing the danger was to undermine the legitimacy of approving immigration permits for non-Jews, and to obtain public support for abolishing the Law of Return. In this regard, the Minister of Industry, Trade and Labour, Eli Yishai (of the Ultra-Orthodox Religious Party), and Member of Knesset, Zevulun Orlev (of the National Religious Party), initiated a proposal to cancel the right to automatic Israeli citizenship for non-Jews with Jewish grandfathers. They argued that the existing Law of Return undermines the identity of Israel as a Jewish state (10 September 2007, *Ha'aretz*). The Chief Rabbi of Israel, Yona Metzger, also demanded that the Law of Return be amended, and that non-Jews be denied the right to automatic Israeli citizenship. Rabbi Metzger argued that the State of Israel has to do everything it can in order to prevent the indiscriminate immigration of those who have no connection with the Jewish state (4 October 2007, *Ma'ariv*). Another amendment to the law was initiated by the Minister of Interior, Meir Shitrit, who proposed that those wishing to become citizens should have to wait a certain period of time and also be required to learn the Hebrew language, and finally pledge allegiance to the State of Israel before they were granted citizenship (10 September 2007, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*). Contrary to those views, the Minister of Strategic Affairs, Avigdor Lieberman (of the *Yisrael Beiteinu* Party, which represents immigrants from the former USSR), argued that the proposals to amend the law reflect beliefs that have historically been proven to be racist (17 September 2007, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*). Against this background, the Israeli Parliament initiated a public opinion survey on the Law of Return. Results revealed that about half of the participants (53 percent) believed that Israeli citizenship should not be granted to people who are not Jewish themselves, whereas only 27 percent of the participants were in favour of keeping the law unchanged (10 April 2008, *Ma'ariv*). However, even though this was a social opportunity to change the policy on the issue of the Law of Return, and some government ministers and Knesset members tried to exploit the episode in order to promote their agendas, these attempts were unsuccessful.

The political gain resulting from the moral panic was reflected in the intensification of social control through legislation that prohibited neo-Nazi activity. Evidently, in contrast to most Western countries, there was no law in Israel that explicitly defined neo-Nazi activity as a criminal offence (9 September 2007, *Ma'ariv*). In light of this situation, the first law to be enacted was the prohibition against neo-Nazi activity. The law stipulated that 'no group of people shall be allowed to organize for the purpose of disseminating propaganda, or for the purpose of engaging in any other organized activity which involves propagating, inciting, or encouraging racism—including propagating, inciting, or encouraging, as mentioned, the principles of Nazism or the Nazi movement' (State of Israel Knesset, 2008). Hence, the clear outcome of the social discourse was the development of mechanisms for controlling future eruptions of neo-Nazi activity, which has unique emotional resonance with the Israeli population. Yet, the fact that there was no prohibition against neo-Nazi activity in Israeli law confirms Hier's (2002) contention that the panic was a temporary rupture in the routine processes of moral regulation.

The second regulation was the law for filtering websites. The law requires Internet providers to offer their clients software that blocks access to websites that have neo-Nazi or paedophile content (28 February 2008, *Ha'aretz*). Notably, legislative initiatives to filter websites existed before the moral panic over neo-Nazism had erupted. These initiatives were formulated as a result of social concern about the younger generation who might be exposed to sexual content and paedophiles. However, the proposals were never enacted as legislation, specifically due to the controversy about freedom of expression and publicity on the Internet. Nonetheless, it seems that the moral panic expedited the enactment of governmental regulations for blocking websites that would not have been achieved as easily through normal political processes. Two additional legislative proposals aimed to broaden the application of the punishment of revoking citizenship and deportation from Israel to include those convicted of neo-Nazi incitement or neo-Nazi activities. These proposals are currently being reviewed by the Constitution, Law and Justice Committee of the Israeli Knesset.

Conclusion

The neo-Nazi gang was an unprecedented phenomenon, which shook the delicate nerves and undermined the moral order of an Israeli society that lives in the shadow of the Holocaust. Therefore, it is not surprising that the episode aroused public uproar and generated introspective processes among the Israeli public. Analysis of the social discourse indicates that the neo-Nazi gang symbolized something far more important than the actual acts of deviance: this episode was symptomatic of more fundamental and deeper social problems in Israeli society. In this context, three common themes emerged.

First, as in other cases of moral panic, the scenario provoked by the neo-Nazi gang reflected processes outlined by Cohen (1972): the discovery of a *new form of deviance*; the existence of *facilitating conditions* among a sensitive and delicate public; and a response of *widespread anxiety*, which was utilized by a *sensationalist media* in order to portray stereotyped images of *folk devils*. Moreover, this scenario fits the key characteristics of moral panic as formulated by Goode and Ben Yehuda (1994): *concern* about a new form of deviance; *hostile* reactions to the deviant group; *consensus* that the case threatens the moral order; reactions that are *disproportionate* to the phenomenon; and *volatility* of the panic.

Second, the social discourse revealed that the cultural origins of the moral panic generated by the neo-Nazis were linked to public concerns regarding rapid social changes in Israeli society during the 1990s. Thus, the initial formulations of this moral panic arose out of considerable concern about transitions in the social, economic, and moral order of society. Based on the conceptual approach proposed by Ben-Yehuda (2009), it can be argued that this moral panic derives from Israel's transition from a predominantly Jewish society to a multicultural society in which moral perceptions and values of different cultural groups are contested and negotiated.

However, this panic can also be seen as a manifestation of the defiance, frustration, and resentment of young immigrants who sought to undermine the moral order of the dominant group because of their dissatisfaction with the absorption process.

In the era of globalization, rapid social changes and economic competition, it can be assumed that immigrants and other aliens are often the main objects of suspicion and moral panic of the dominant groups. Thus, it can be argued that the neo-Nazi moral panic ensued from a foreign threat, and was utilized by the dominant groups to legitimize the use of harsh control in order to maintain their power and position. Yet, because there was no prohibition against neo-Nazi activity in Israeli law, it seems that this moral panic was a temporary rupture in the routine processes of moral regulation.

Third, the analysis shows that the social discourse has positioned neo-Nazi youth as a risk to the moral foundation of the Israeli society. Hence, the discourse has become a forum for neo-liberal governance, which has employed strategies that emphasize risk, morality, national loyalty, and citizenship in order to impose regulations and re-establish the moral order. Furthermore, the media have served the governing agents by constructing risk through sensationalist coverage, which has highlighted the sociohistorical context of the Holocaust trauma and provoked a collective 'emotional effervescence'. The findings show that the moral panic was deliberately manipulated by politicians who sought to abolish the right of non-Jewish relatives of Israeli residents to be granted automatic Israeli citizenship. Ultimately, however, these attempts failed. In light of the fact that the Law of Return is one of the fundamental laws of Israeli society, it can be assumed that any change in the law is contingent upon broad public consensus. However, the current debate relating to the law is so intense that it would be virtually impossible to introduce any changes in the law.

Yet, even though the moral discourse has not led to a change in the Law of Return, it seems that moral panic has had long-lasting repercussions for legal policy. As such, it has left a legacy of new moral regulations and increased social control, which were directed specifically at the younger generation and immigrants. Moreover, the moral panic generated by the neo-Nazi gang has been engraved in the collective memory of the Israeli public, and will be part of the continuing narrative of concern about issues relating to migration in Israeli society.

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