Urban Legends, Moral Panics and Mythmaking

Overview of Course:
This course puts under critical review what we think we know about an issue. It provides the analytical tools for students to recognize statistics that defy logic, ideological claims that are passed off as data, moralizing dressed up as human rights issues; and myths, stereotypes and assumptions that justify exclusion, disenfranchisement, expulsion, incarceration and violence. In short, we will examine the anatomy of moral panics and myth-making and consider the consequences. We will unpack panics and myths around such issues as: human trafficking and the sex trade; migration and refugees; Muslim life in post-9/11 United States; race, poverty and violence; gender and sexuality; AIDS; art and pornography; and the American dream and upward mobility.

This course grows out of my own experience as a researcher on politicized topics such as sex work, trafficking, and undocumented migration. I routinely am asked to weigh in on statistics and claims that just don't make sense. They often grow out of racist thinking and strategy. And, as we will learn throughout the semester, these fears and the "evidence" they generate shape policy, funding, and resource allocation. Given how frustrated I have been -- particularly answering questions by the media on panics around trafficking -- I decided to call on a number of colleagues here at Georgetown to share their own experiences with moral panics and myths. We are extremely fortunate to hear from these experts on how they too must regularly disabuse the media of unproven statistics and point out policies born from bias.

As a class we will work together to monitor panics and myths as they unfold this semester. For example, we will keep a keen analytical eye as to the reporting on cases of police violence in the United States, Syrian refugees in Europe and the U.S, Central American migrants in the U.S., and the U.S. Presidential campaign that thus far has featured discussions on who should/should not belong in the U.S (candidates for example have proposed a registry for Muslims, barring entry for Syrian refugees, and revoking birthright citizenship). While politicians and the media flamboyantly ignore evidence -- and in some cases strategically incite panic -- we will carefully and coolly chart what they gain and what, in the process, we all lose.

Course Goals:
By the end of the semester you should be able to:
1. Identify systems of power at work that uphold certain normativities -- such as being white, male, heterosexual, middle-class, Christian, or Western.
2. Identify strategies and actions that aim to exclude and disenfranchise.
3. Identify who gains from panics and myth-making.
4. Question how and why data and statistics get produced, disseminated -- and vouched for or disputed.
5. Question the background, training, and motivations of "experts."
6. Understand the methodologies anthropologists use and the contributions they make – as field workers and writers of ethnography. (As opposed to scholars’ methodologies and work products in other disciplines).
7. Make meaningful connections between your own readings and key theoretical concepts in anthropology.

Course Format and Requirements:
1. A team of 3-4 student discussants will lead class discussion. We will decide on a schedule during the first week of class. Every student will lead discussion two times during the semester. Teams must meet in-person to prepare how they will facilitate discussion. There are no discussants when we have guest speakers.
2. Throughout the semester you will monitor in the media how the issues we talk about in class - and those that crop up -- unfold. **We will build an annotated bibliography as a class.** Everyone is responsible for making 5 contributions to the bibliography. Contributions can include books and articles; novels and poetry; media sources; congressional testimony or other statements released by government officials; or links to art, music, films. The annotation should be no more than a paragraph. It should summarize the material and explain how it is an example of a panic, a refutation of one, or the consequence of one. See the items on the syllabus as examples of the kinds of materials you would select. We will build the bibliography as a Wiki on Blackboard. You will put your name and the date after your contribution in parenthesis (Professor Brennan, 1/11/16). Do not leave your contributions to the final days of class! Rather, as you consume media daily and read for your other classes, keep an eye out for materials. 10% of grade.
3. **Book Review:** select a book written by an anthropologist on a topic that tends to be surrounded by panic and myth-making. Please write a 2-page double-spaced review of the book. 25% of grade. **Due: February 16th.**
4. **Mock Conference Presentation:** Write a 3-page double-spaced paper on a panic of your choice. Everyone will present their paper in short 5-minute conference-style presentations. This is an important skill -- to convey thoughtful analysis succinctly and powerfully. You will hand the paper in for a grade. We will develop a schedule of presentations. Your paper is due the day of your presentation. 25% of grade.
5. **Research paper on the topic of your choice.** This will draw from your own anthropological reading. Students will present their key findings and analysis in 10-minute presentations the last days of class. Ideally, your book review and 3-page paper (and conference-style presentation) will be on a topic in preparation for your final research paper. The paper must be 12 pages. Due during exam week by **noon, Friday May 6th** in a box outside my office door (Car Barn Suite 308). 40% of grade.

You can find the grading scale I will use in the undergraduate bulletin:  [http://bulletin.georgetown.edu/regulation/studying](http://bulletin.georgetown.edu/regulation/studying).
Class policies:
1. You must not just come to class, but be engaged. This means not only reading ahead of time, but also thinking critically about the material and how it relates to the core concepts of the class. How do the readings build on, diverge from, or challenge other material we have tackled? Come to class excited to share your insights and to hear fellow students' take. Be ready to listen to viewpoints you've never encountered.
2. More than three absences can affect your grade.
3. Computers are only to take notes or to pull up readings. Any other use could result in a no-computer policy.
4. I do not accept late work without a Dean's intervention. The grade drops a full grade for each day an assignment is late. The grade drops by the hour for the final research paper.

Guidance on monitoring the media and building our annotated bibliography:
I'm writing this on January 11th. As of today, here are examples of hot-button themes that invite panics and myths. Let's see what unfolds in the months ahead for us to monitor and add to the bibliography -- and talk about in class -- throughout the semester:
1. Police and communities of color
2. Bill Cosby
3. Refugees in Europe
4. Immigrants in the U.S.
5. Trafficking

Guidance on how to keep an eye out for material for the annotated bibliography that documents the consequences!! of panics:
While reading the news over this past weekend, this one sentence in a letter to the editor caught my attention:
*8 and 10-year old children yelling "Build A Wall" at Trump Rally
https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-extreme-meets-the-mainstream/2016/01/08/3d9c0804-b3e3-11e5-8abc-d09392edc612_story.html

Perhaps you know about a well-publicized violent beating at an earlier Trump rally:
*Mercutio Southall Jr. beaten and choked at Trump rally in Birmingham, Alabama

*And here is a thoughtful response to Trump's call for a registry of Muslims based on research by Moustafa Bayoumi (whose book How Does it Feel to Be A Problem?) we will be reading:
Readings:
The following required books are on sale at Bridge Street Books (located at 2814 Pennsylvania Ave; they are down M Street towards George Washington University, on the same block as the Four Seasons Hotel; hours: M-F 11-9 and Sunday 12-6). All of the other assignments are on blackboard. If you miss class, you are responsible for checking for any materials I handed out in class on blackboard.

Key texts:


Week 1
Overview of course
The "Zombie" statistics that inspired this course (they won't die....)

Wednesday, January 13
Urban Legends and Pulp Fiction about the Super Bowl and Trafficking into the Sex Sector


The GAATW report cited in this news article (read the Executive Summary and flip through the report): http://www.gaatw.org/publications/WhatsTheCostOfARumour.11.15.2011.pdf
Week 2
Key Concepts
What is a Moral Panic? Legend? Myth?

Monday, January 18
No school (MLK day)

Wednesday, January 20


Weeks 3 and 4
Numbers and Truth Aura
and
Those Talked about Talk Back to Representations, Rescue, Help, Advice, and Aid

Monday, January 25


Suggested Reading (Note how much money was thrown around in Seattle v. how many people actually assisted):
Wednesday, January 27


Two Short Video Clips:

Somaly Uh Uh Bad Rehab -- by sex worker rights group in Cambodia Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GM0r7N1rIMI


Week 5
Beyond Spectacularization:
What Trafficking -- and Life After -- Really Looks Like

Monday, February 1

Read chapters: Introduction, Chapters 1-2

Wednesday, February 3
*Life Interrupted*
Read chapters: Chapters 3-5, and the Conclusion


Suggested Reading:

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**Weeks 6, 7 and 8**
*Immigration: Worthy and Unworthy Citizens*

Monday, February 8
Syrian Refugees
Professor Rochelle Davis will join the class

Wednesday, February 10
Read through p. 115.

Monday, Feb 15
No school (President's Day)

Wednesday, February 17
*Darkness at Daybreak*
Read the remaining chapters

We will watch the documentary *Becky's Journey* by Sine Plambech.
Here's the trailer:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOnL0Ib1H-k
Weeks 7 and 8  
Race, Safety, Belonging, and Opportunity

Monday, February 22
Bad Girls and the State: The Racial Politics of Unplanned Pregnancy
Professor Marcia Chatelain will join the class.


Wednesday, February 24
Read the first half of the book through p. 114

Kehinde Wiley's paintings:  
http://kehindewiley.com/  
http://npg.si.edu/exhibit/recognize/paintings.html


Monday, February 29
Renegade Dreams
Read the remaining chapters.

http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/03/The-Gangsters-Of-Ferguson/386893/

Wednesday, March 2
Professor Sabrina Wesley-Nero will join the class.


**Week 9**

No class March 7 and 9; Spring Break

**Week 10**

Post-9/11 and Belonging

**Monday, March 14**


Read through p. 114

**Wednesday, March 16**

*How Does It Feel to Be A Problem?*

Read the remaining chapters.

And on Bayoumi's website:

"So, I Rewrote the Mayor of Roanoke's Statement on Admitting Refugees"

http://moustafabayoumi.com/so-i-rewrote-the-mayor-of-roanokes-statement-on-admitting-syrian-refugees/

**Week 11**

Ghosts, Witchcraft and Myth-as-Resistance

**Monday, March 21**

We will join Professor Vazquez del Aquila's class to discuss his article, "Human Fat Murders: Pishtacos, Structural Inequalities, and Resistances in Peru."

**Weeks 11 (continued) and 12 and 13**

Policing Gender and Sexuality

**Wednesday, March 23**

AIDS


Monday, March 28 -- Easter Break

Wednesday, March 30
Read through p. 83.

Monday, April 4
Dude You're A Fag
Read remaining chapters.

Selections from the graphic novel:

Wednesday, April 6
Professor Fida Adely will join the class.


Week 14
Art and Censorship

Monday, April 11
Chapter: "Censorship."

http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/nov/17/robert-mapplethorpe-the-perfect-moment-25-years-later

Suggested:
For a chronology see:
http://www.upenn.edu/pnc/ptkoch.html


**Wednesday, April 13**
No class -- I'm at a conference.

**Week 15**
**From the Headlines**

**Monday, April 18**
**Unaccompanied Minors**
Professor Susan Terrio will join the class


**Wednesday, April 20**
**Class Choice**
I am keeping this class as a placeholder for a topic and readings that we will select together. By this point in the semester students will have a firm grasp of how to identify and analyze a moral panic.

**Week 16 and 17**
**Class Presentations**

**Monday, April 25**
**Wednesday, April 27**
**Monday, May 2**

1/13/16