

## ***Pop Culture Panics:***

### *How Moral Crusaders Construct Meanings of Deviance and Delinquency*

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## **Preface**

Can you imagine a place where police censor movies, where books are banned and burned, and authorities outlaw pinball machines?

All of these happened in the United States during the twentieth century. But why?

*Pop Culture Panics* examines these and other extreme reactions to popular culture over the past century. Rather than simply reactions to troubling content, crusades against video games, movies, pinball machines, comic books, music, and new media are rooted in struggles for power over a group feared as a threat to the status quo.

Campaigns against popular culture remind us that people actively work to construct meanings of deviance, as moral crusaders strive to convince others to see the world as they do, and try to encourage us to further restrict the content of popular culture to protect “us” from “them.” Anti-pop culture crusades happen when a group is considered both potentially vulnerable to the influence of media and threatening at the same time. Crusaders successfully used anxieties about social change and the increased leisure time of children and teens to create fear and expand the definition of delinquency.

Using examples from recent history offer readers a critical distance from the emotional of moral crusades. The purpose of this book is to create a critical lens through which to view current and future attempts of modern-day moral crusaders, who try to convince us that simple solutions—like regulating popular culture—are the answer to complex social problems.

### *Learning From Pop Culture Panics*

*Pop Culture Panics* focuses specifically on moral crusaders to better understand what motivated them to wage campaigns against popular culture. In most cases, moral crusaders feel threatened by **social changes** they connect with a new form of popular culture.

The context and timing are crucial for understanding why people launched crusades against silent movies, pinball machines, comic books, jazz, rock and roll, rap, and video games. *Pop Culture Panics* explores how fears of **immigration, urbanization, anti-Semitism** and the **reduction of child labor** sparked concerns about movies almost as soon as they became popular in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Pinball machines may now seem innocuous—and sources of nostalgia—but when they first appeared in the 1930s coincided with the rise in **organized crime** and concerns that young people would **gamble** rather than work.

Comic books aroused postwar anxieties about the new **experiences of childhood**. Mostly out of the paid labor force with more leisure time and discretionary spending money than ever before, the new favored pastime of “**idle**” **children** awakened fears that **juvenile delinquency** would skyrocket, with their graphic crime stories and macabre themes.

As postwar children became teens, many began listening to a new genre, rock and roll, a hybrid of many musical traditions largely created by African American musicians. Coinciding with the civil rights movement and challenges to Jim Crow laws, crusades about early rock and roll were rooted in concerns about **racial integration**. As music became an integral part of baby boomers’ experiences of adolescence, some religious leaders feared that rock was displacing the **role of traditional religion** in young people’s lives, and that the music itself was a satanic force. Moral crusaders claimed that hidden satanic messages could be heard on some records when played backwards, and called for legislation to create labels and warn parents of the alleged threat.

Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, entertainment choices have expanded dramatically and become more segmented. From seeing movies and playing pinball in public places to reading comic books and listening to music in private, controlling access to popular

culture has become increasingly difficult, drawing concerns that adults can no longer limit what their children see, hear and know. Today, smart phone technology makes it even more difficult to control, creating concerns about “**sexting**,” reflecting fears that without restraint many young people will engage in this risky behavior (although adults are more likely to than teens).

This same technology creates opportunities for new moral crusades. Not only about new technologies like **social networking**, but moral crusaders can use social media to spread concerns with others without traditional media gatekeepers. **Micro crusades** can take place through new media, as groups that view the Harry Potter series as satanic can communicate with one another and organize outside of traditional large-scale media platforms.

Ultimately, *Pop Culture Panics* explores how meanings of deviance are socially constructed, created by people who seek to persuade others that controlling the content of popular culture will stave off the “threat” of the feared group, be they immigrants, people of color, or teens. Behind the crusades against popular culture are groups that struggle to hold onto a past that they see as slipping away, as demographic and economic shifts create changes that lead to fears about and for young people.