

Your Voice, April 2008

***The Politics of Antisocial Behaviour: Amoral Panics* by Stuart Waiton [Short review]**

(Routledge, New York and London, 2008)

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Teachers are nowadays uncomfortably familiar with antisocial behaviour. This book by a leading figure in US/UK sociology, drawing on much recent research in that field, gives a fascinating account. It describes a change which is perceived to have occurred during the past two decades in the moral/cultural attitudes that shape the state's legislative and other governmental responses to what the author calls "panics".

Here the lay reader stumbles on sociological jargon, but that is easily mastered. For Waiton and his colleagues a "panic" is what the OED describes as a sudden and excessive feeling of alarm or fear, usually affecting a body of persons, originating in some real or supposed danger vaguely apprehended, and leading to extravagant or injudicious efforts to secure safety. This may arise in connection to the misbehaviour of children, for example bullying, or threats to children, such as paedophilia. The sociologists cover a wide field however. In the past two decades the British public has got into "panics" over things affecting all age groups and ranging from AIDS to mad cow disease, from binge drinking to raves.

These "panics" used to be based largely on moral principles of right and wrong, and so are called by sociologists "moral panics". Waiton detects a remarkable recent shift to factors not morally linked, such as a hankering for safety. Hence the reference in his title to "amoral panics".

Waiton gloomily concludes that the values of duty, chastity, sobriety and self discipline that formed the basis standards of past moral campaigners are today felt to be alien – so much so that those who embody them are seen as a threat to "the new amoral and diminished norms".

The above scarcely does justice to Waiton's book. A longer treatment is available at www.francisbennion.com/2008/010.htm.