# Moral panic related to mineral development projects – Examples from Poland

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This paper describes a moral panic as a social phenomenon in relation to the issue of mineral development projects. A moral panic involves creating a sense of insecurity in a group of people by exaggerating facts that are perceived as a social problem. Mineral exploration and exploitation are activities that are particularly likely to spark public protests because of the common misunderstanding of the character and scale of the impact that they might have on the natural environment and local community. The paper presents the sources, mechanisms and results of such a moral panic based on the examples from Poland concerning various kinds of mineral resources that are extracted with the use of different methods and on a different scale. The perceived threats associated with mineral exploitation are often exaggerated and sometimes completely false, which is because society is susceptible to manipulation by the media. This causes substantial financial losses not only for exploration and mining companies which are forced to give up their projects even though particular environmental requirements are met, but also for the local communities themselves since they are deprived of potential jobs as well as income from taxes and mining royalties. The phenomenon of moral panic related to mineral development is a serious problem also because local government activists increasingly more often create such a panic out of political expediency. This kind of panic can also be created by other interest groups. It should be emphasised that resistance to a moral panic does not mean that one cannot object to geological and mining activities when this is justified; then such protests can be even more effective.

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## Introduction

Mineral exploitation constitutes one of the more important sectors of the economy. The extraction of mineral fuels is of particular significance for the security and political position of countries. The exploitation of certain other minerals (in Poland these are, for example, copper and silver) brings significant revenue to the State Treasury and also to local government units. Analyses in this area usually deal with the technical and economic as well as environmental aspects of mineral exploitation. Also, the issue of social acceptance of mineral extraction is increasingly often being discussed by business practitioners and social theorists with a special focus on people's concerns about the negative impact of mining on the broadly defined natural and anthropogenic environment (Badera, 2010; Campbell and Roberts, 2010; Steelman and Carmin, 1998). For example, one website that is devoted to business (biznes.pl) says the following: "According to

experts from the UK Energy Research Centre, the greatest challenge for companies that are interested in exploiting shale gas in the UK and throughout Europe is how to convince the public that hydraulic fracturing technology is safe".

Obviously, shale gas is not the only mineral which is the subject on ongoing disputes over the political and socio-economic importance and environmental safety of exploitation. In practice, the exploitation of any kind of mineral deposits can meet with either hostility or acceptance from the public.

Numerous papers describe social actors and the dynamics of environmental conflicts associated with various mining projects, mainly outside Europe (e.g. Lane and Rickson, 1997; Hilson, 2002; Muradian et al., 2003; Hilson and Yakovleva, 2007; Anguelovski, 2011; Farrell et al., 2012; Velásquez, 2012; Bacci and Diniz, 2013; Tiainen et al., 2014). The available literature dealing with socio-environmental issues in European countries is relatively modest (Damigos and Kaliampakos, 2006; Badera, 2010; Zobrist et al., 2009; Vintro et al., 2012; Suopajärvi, 2013; Sobczyk and Badera, 2013; Sobczyk et al., 2014; Ranängen and Zobel, 2014), probably because there have been no large investments in recent years. Currently, a relatively large number of new mining projects are being implemented in Europe as a result of the increase in the

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demand for raw materials, coal-based energy policy in certain countries, as well as changes in the EU resource policy related to the non-energy sector (which took place several years ago). Consequently, also problems associated with the public's acceptance of such projects started to occur. Because Europe is relatively highly urbanised, and at the same time there are great nature conservation sites, it is usually a difference in opinions concerning further land development (e.g. Król and Kot, 2010; Niec et al., 2014) that is the direct cause of conflicts in Europe. The context of every mineral development project is unique (Prno and Slocombe 2012), but one can also notice certain regularities. The specific role of particular groups of stakeholders (stakeholder theory) was presented in detail in many publications (e.g. Breaking new ground: mining, minerals and sustainable development. The Report of the MMSD Project, 2002; Azapagic, 2004; Badera, 2010; Mutti et al., 2012). Apart from worrying about the environment, local communities also demand a greater share in the benefits and more involvement in decision-making (Prno and Slocombe, 2012; Prno, 2013).

It is not as much the more or less reliable and objective information as collective emotions that are to blame for the above-mentioned acceptance or the lack of it. Fear, panic, jealousy and a moral upheaval are often fuelled by the media according to the principle: "bad news is good news" (Badera and Jaksoń, 2011). Finally, it should also be stressed that the political and socio-economic objectives of the state and sometimes also those of the local authorities may be incompatible with the views of a certain group of citizens on mineral exploitation. In accordance with the "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) principle, it is mainly local communities living in the existing or projected mining areas or in the immediate vicinity of such areas that have a negative attitude towards mineral development projects (Fischel, 2001; Freudenberg and Steinsapir, 1991; Smith and Marquez, 2000).

In a democratic state under the rule of law society has many tools for expressing disapproval of the exploitation of minerals. Consumer boycotts (of products of those companies that mine or process minerals as well as of their franchisees), petitions to the authorities, demonstrations, websites or statements to the media are very effective methods for hindering the implementation of mineral development projects. Whether these tools will be used depends on many factors. Among such factors is a moral panic about mining activity, i.e. the social phenomenon that is discussed in this paper. This phenomenon was originally analysed in the context of subcultures (Cohen, 2002). Currently, it seems to occur wherever economic activities, such as mineral exploitation, whose impact on the natural and anthropogenic environment causes concern are carried out.

## Moral panic – the concept

According to one American Internet dictionary (sociology.about.com), "Moral panic is an extreme social response to the belief that the moral condition of society is deteriorating at a rapid pace. Numerous sociologists have interpreted moral panic as a device used to distract public attention from underlying social problems and justify increased social control over the working class and other potentially rebellious segments of society".

The Polish authors Sztompka and Bogunia-Borowska (2008) state that "a moral panic occurs when particular states, events, individuals or groups of people are began to be identified as threats to societal values and interests; their nature is presented in a stylised way by the media, preachers and politicians".

M. Soin believes (2011) that a moral panic is when an event, person or group are unreasonably defined, in particular by the

media, as a threat to the values that are cherished by society, and this threat is at the least exaggerated. A moral panic, somewhat by definition, is an overreaction which is disproportionate to the actual problem. Among those who create, sustain and also succumb to this panic are the media, experts, political elites, state administration bodies, legislative bodies as well as interest groups which, more or less consciously, manipulate public opinion. One can also cite Hunt (1997) who says that a moral panic "refers to an exaggerated response or over-reaction in the media to what is seen as a social problem".

According to S. Cohen, one of the pioneers of research on this concept, the fact that "the relationship between the perception of a social object and an attitude towards this object is complicated" is the root cause of a moral panic. "To put is simply, at least two stages occur: first we perceive certain things and then we make a selection against certain already existing orientation, and then we shape and integrate what we have perceived into more permanent attitudes. (…) after the first impression has passed, the social reaction to any unexpected social occurrence involves assigning a meaning to what has happened, especially if such an occurrence is perceived as a disruption to the existing social structure or a threat to the values cherished by society"[1] (Cohen, 2002). In other words, a moral panic means that certain occurrences are interpreted negatively with regard to their conformity to ethical norms, irrespective of the actual course of events and consequences of such occurrences.

Very often it is centres of power (also of symbolic power) that create panic which is related to compliance with moral norms and values. "Attention is focused on fictitious problems and shifted away from real problems. If no ways of dealing with such an alleged threat are proposed then it takes on a life of its own. It becomes dangerous when it leads to repressive actions" (Soin, 2011). Therefore, a moral panic can be a political tool. According to Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009), "the theoretical framework that is most often used to explain the causes of a moral panic is connected with an attitude that is based on the theory of interest groups which indicates that power elites are only one of the collective actors who have a reason and the ability to foment unrest and uncertainty among larger groups of people for the sake of safeguarding their own economic, ideological and political interests".[2] Therefore, a moral panic can be created by politicians who want to gain the local community's support by acting as its defenders and sometimes also to divert attention from their own actions. The media sustain this panic in order to make profit and/ or win these politicians' favour.

The harmfulness of a moral panic that entails making bad law is an important aspect of this discussion. In Poland, the moral panic about great financiers and the hysteria surrounding the privatisation of banks led to the adoption of the Financial Market Supervision Act of 2006, which is one of the most socially harmful acts centralising financial supervision in Europe in the opinion of many experts.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) identified five elements of a moral panic:

1. Concern – there must be an awareness of the fact that a given group and/or its activity may have a negative influence on society.
2. Hostility – resentment against a given group and/or its activity which is somewhat different than the rest of society and its activities; a clear division is created between "us" and "them".

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[1] Translation from Polish edition.
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