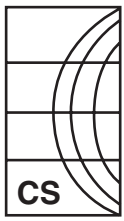

Contexts of Anxiety

The Moral Panic over 'Senseless Violence' in the Netherlands

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abstract: This article analyses the attention given in the Netherlands to what is called 'senseless violence' as an expression of the general idea that violence is growing, and as an example of a moral panic. It is argued that this is a combination of a grassroots and interest-group moral panic that has been carried along mainly by media and institutionalized civil initiatives. The production of this moral panic is illustrated, together with its consequences in the areas of politics, law and social science. It is argued that the moral panic over 'senseless violence' is in many respects a 'classic' example of a moral panic, but that it departs from this pattern in the sense that it is characterized by the conspicuous absence of moral deviants. Also, it is argued that the institutionalization of anxiety can cause a moral panic to persist for several years. In the case of 'senseless violence', the moral panic emerged in 1997 and only very slowly decreased after 2003. The institutionalization of anxiety means that many institutional remnants of the moral panic linger on and affect contexts such as politics.

keywords: anxiety ✦ institutionalization ✦ law ✦ moral panic ✦ Netherlands ✦ politics ✦ violence

Introduction: Senseless Violence and Moral Panics

In the last decade, much attention has been given in the Netherlands to what has been called 'senseless violence' (*zinloos geweld*). 'Senseless violence' is an equivalent of the Anglo-Saxon concept of 'random violence' (see Best, 1999). It usually refers to apparently random instances of violence in the public sphere that do not take place for the sake of some extrinsic motive such as, in the case of robbery, financial gain (Schinkel, 2004; WODC, 1999). The label 'senseless' is indicative of an apparent lack

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of motive that can, in other cases of violence, be recognized. One might take the term as an illustration of the strength of will to understand personal violence – even those cases that cannot be understood because they appear 'senseless' are categorized and thereby somehow neutralized, understood. In a similar vain, Primo Levi has said with respect to the *understanding* of the Holocaust that '"understanding" a proposal or human behaviour means to "contain" it, contain its author' (Levi, 1965: 395). The notion of senseless violence is itself the clearest expression of an underlying idea that violence in general grows, for two reasons. First, communication about senseless violence is accompanied by reference to a supposed general increase in violence. Second, the emergence of the *category* of 'senseless violence' is indicative of the idea that violence grows not only in a quantitative, but also in a qualitative sense. New *kinds* of violence are appearing. Alongside the gradual differentiation of forms of violence into categories such as sexual violence and domestic violence, senseless violence is supposed to indicate a new kind of violence that adds to the perceived increase of violence in general. One sometimes gets the impression that Dutch youth are engaging in frenzies of violence, like modern-day *bacchantes*. It is relevant to note that police-recorded violence increased in the 1990s, yet numbers of victims reported did not. Dutch sociologists and criminologists have extensively debated the question whether violence has grown or not, and no conclusive results have appeared (see Wittebrood, 2001; Wittebrood and Junger, 1999). Whichever is the case, the outbreak of widespread attention to 'senseless violence' can in no way be attributed to a dramatic increase in cases of violence. In this article, the attention given to 'senseless violence' is therefore considered to be part of a *moral panic* that involves the broader idea that violence grows. The concept of moral panic is specifically useful in that it allows different contexts to be studied as different ways of dealing with a social construction such as 'senseless violence' or the idea of the growth of violence. The concept of moral panic has been developed by Stanley Cohen in his study of Mods and Rockers (Cohen, 1972). Since its inception, it has been much applied and developed, and has as such become a key sociological concept (Thompson, 1998). As McRobbie and Thornton state:

> . . . moral panics have become the way in which daily events are brought to the attention of the public. They are a standard response, a familiar, sometimes weary, even ridiculous rhetoric rather than an exceptional emergency intervention. Used by politicians to orchestrate consent, by business to promote sales in certain niche markets, and by media to make home and social affairs newsworthy, moral panics are constructed on a daily basis. (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995: 560)

In 'Moral Panics as Cultural Politics', the new 2002 introduction to *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen notes that 'the same public and media discourse that provides the raw evidence of moral panic, uses the concept as first-order description, reflexive comment or criticism' (Cohen, 2002: vii). Ungar (2001) has argued that research on moral panics is in need of adjustment as a result of the emergence of the risk society (Beck, 1986). Environmental risks lead to threats that incite new fears, and in which no moral culprits can be identified. Yet public opinion polls show that Dutch citizens are far more touched by issues of crime and safety than by issues concerning environmental safety. The moral panic surrounding 'senseless violence' discussed here is an illustration of the usefulness of the idea of a *moral* panic, yet it is characterized by a conspicuous absence of moral deviants. Anxiety is a somewhat paradoxical emotion, especially when experienced by large groups of people. On the one hand, communicated anxiety is always experienced as real and honest by an observer (Luhmann, 1986). Whoever fears must face a real danger, and whoever is concerned about other people must be honest: 'It is impossible to reply "you are wrong" to someone saying she is afraid' (Luhmann, 1988: 33). David Garland has argued that anxiety over crime in general has to be seen as a reaction to high crime rates in late modernity. High crime is a 'normal social phenomenon'. As a result, a 'crime complex' has developed, and crime-conscious citizens deal with crime-avoidance in everyday life. This is accompanied by fear and anxiety (Garland, 1996). The 'late modern' emphasis on security has led, according to Nikolas Rose, to a 'politics of insurance', a kind of risk management in the face of violence and crime (Rose, 2000). These ideas suggest that there is a causal connection between crime rates and levels of public anxiety. In this analysis of the public anxiety over 'senseless violence', no assumptions are made concerning the existence of such a causal link between crime rates and levels of anxiety. The relation between attention to 'senseless violence' and violent crime rates is, however, discussed in the second part of this article.

Some crucial aspects of moral panics can be identified. They are: (1) a high concern and anxiety over certain kinds of behaviour; (2) an increase in hostility towards the category of people described as a threat; (3) a certain disproportionality in the assessment of the threat and the depiction of the problem; and (4) a sudden appearance and short life-span. In several respects, the moral panic over senseless violence, while it can be legitimately called a 'moral panic', deviates from the standard notion of a moral panic. First, this has occurred without there being a clear-cut category of persons that have become, so to speak, 'the face of the threat'. Perhaps this is a feature of the moral panic over 'senseless violence' that has contributed to its sustenance, since nothing incites fear as an invisible

or at least not clearly identifiable threat. Second, as an analysis of the moral panic revolving around senseless violence shows, a moral panic can have a considerable life-span. The core of the moral panic over senseless violence in the Netherlands is a combination of civil action (organizations, demonstrations, silent marches, publications) and media attention. Especially where civil action is concerned, organizational structures and, since 2002, superstructures have come into existence. These constitute what I call an *institutionalization of anxiety* that leads to the lengthening of the life-span of the moral panic they are the result of.

In Cohen's original formulation of the theory of moral panic, media reaction towards a deviant event also generates substantial 'official' response. This need not be the case, however, since politicians in office cannot be said to have a real interest in contributing to a moral panic involving constructions of violence. Yet since they neither benefit from denying the 'seriousness of the problem', they are in a position well worth paying attention to, and in the third part of this article, the political context is examined. The second part focuses on public opinion and the media, giving some indication of how the moral panic of violence has come into existence in the Netherlands, and has revolved specifically around the issue of 'senseless violence'. In this section, the 'grassroots' reactions (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994) to senseless violence that are a part of the moral panic surrounding violence are highlighted, and the role of the media is examined. First, however, we need to look at the background to this emergence of moral panic revolving around (senseless) violence in the Netherlands.

The Production of Panic

The moral panic over violence gained significantly in substance with the construction of the category of 'senseless violence' in 1997. The violent death of Meindert Tjoelker in Leeuwarden (1997) can be seen as a trigger that led to a marked increase in media coverage of interpersonal violence. After his death and the attention devoted to it, a victim of similar violence the year before, Joes Kloppenburg, was honoured with a silent march a year after his death. The death of Meindert Tjoelker thus led to the construction of the category 'senseless violence', which could then be applied *ex post facto* to cases that were, *qua* violence, similar but now seen in a different light. Kloppenburg's death in 1997 now came to be seen as 'senseless violence' in a sense *avant la lettre*. Similarly, an even older case came to be classified as 'senseless violence'. This was the death of Kerwin Duinmijer in 1983, a 15-year-old black youth beaten and stabbed severely in a racist attack by skinheads, and who died as a consequence of his injuries. In the early 1980s, his death was predominantly seen as a racist incidenct, as racism was a major public issue in those days. After 1997, his

case was in a sense reclassified as 'senseless violence' and it came to provide one of the earliest examples of a phenomenon that could now be given a history and could be seen to have significantly increased in scale since those early cases. This leads to the paradoxical situation that, in the first instance, the emergence of the category of senseless violence indicates a qualitative growth of violence, which then becomes so popular that it starts to absorb other categories of violence to the extent that it usurps them altogether. In 2002, an organization called Senseless Violence Against Animals was founded.[1] Cases of racist and domestic violence tended to become recoded under the label of 'senseless violence'. When media coverage of 'senseless violence' was considered, it was seen to include such incidents as a Turkish case of honour revenge, road rage and physical violence on public transport, and the case of a schizophrenic vagabond stabbing a man to death in a library 'just like that'. One of the main civil action sites against senseless violence (www.zinloosgeweld.nl) posed the question: 'Have you ever been a perpetrator of senseless violence (bullying, aggression, physical violence)?'[2] Thus, the concept seemed to be turning in on itself: while it initially involved acts no sane person would commit, it now appeared that anyone could at some point or other have been a perpetrator of 'senseless violence'. This can be justified by invoking the pacifist idea that *all* violence is 'senseless', which becomes apparent for instance in the deliberate equation between 'violence' and 'senseless violence' by the Stop Senseless Violence Foundation.

With regard to how a moral panic takes off, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) have distinguished between three possible paths. A first is the instigation by an interest group; the second, a moral panic engineered by the elite; and the third, a moral panic produced by the grassroots. In the case of (senseless) violence in the Netherlands, a combination of interest-group and grassroots instigation appears to be the situation. The word 'senseless violence' was introduced in the sense to which is referred here by police commissioner Bangma, who published an article using the term in the *Leeuwarder Courant*, a regional newspaper, following the violent death of Meindert Tjoelker on 13 September 1997. Bangma called upon the people of Leeuwarden, where the incident took place, to observe one minute of silence. As such, attention to 'senseless violence' was spurred by a police commissioner, who can in this case be regarded as part of an interest group. What followed was a massive response that set an example for other cities. In a relatively short time, silence – whether several minutes' silence or a silent march – became a trademark response to 'senseless violence'. As I argue, the relatively independent effect of the media in the construction, and not only in the amplification and sustenance of the moral panic, is considerable. It was, one might say, simultaneously an interest-group and grassroots media coverage that brought forth the

moral panic. And the media were not simply a medium, but they were, to paraphrase McLuhan (1994), at the same time the message. Yet the media are but one of the actors Cohen (1972) describes as integral to moral panics. Next to the media, law enforcement, politicians, action groups and 'folk devils' (moral deviants) are involved. In this article, all these actors are discussed with the exception of folk devils, since, I argue, the moral panic over 'senseless violence' is characterized by the conspicuous absence of moral deviants. The second section starts with a discussion of the moral panic in public life, which involves various action groups, and thus makes for an institutionalization of anxiety. It proceeds with a discussion of the role of the media in the production of the panic. The third section then briefly discusses the role of the political system.

Outlets of Public Anxiety and the Institutionalization of Anxiety

First, it is relevant to note that general feelings of insecurity among the Dutch public show no signs of 'moral panic' according to the statistics (CBS, 2006; SCP, 2004, 2006). In the 1990s, a slight decrease of feelings of insecurity can be observed. From 1999 to 2004, they remain relatively stable, settling to 1999 levels in 2004 after a slight increase (CBS, 2006; SCP, 2006). Nonetheless, 80 per cent of all people in 2004 thought that 'crime has recently grown' and more than 25 per cent experienced feelings of insecurity. Furthermore, about 75 per cent of Dutch people thought that problems of violent crime would be greater in 2020 (SCP, 2004: 480). Stability in feelings of insecurity can still mean that the level of experienced insecurity is rather high – the call is normative here, and I shall not venture into drawing further conclusions. But the interesting thing is that although these feelings certainly do not grow, a moral panic over 'senseless violence' has nonetheless emerged. Speaking of such a moral panic is wholly justified once institutionalized civil action against 'senseless violence' and its media coverage are considered. That feelings of insecurity have hardly risen but expectations of increasing violence exist makes these core elements of a moral panic all the more interesting in light of the social construction of the threat voiced in discourse on 'senseless violence'.

In popular discourse, violence is a subject of 'public opinion'. Luhmann defines public opinion as that which is observed and described as public opinion (Luhmann, 2002: 286). Public opinion therefore has a self-inducing tendency. As soon as 'people' feel violence is growing, it becomes what 'one' cannot fail to see. Popular or public discourse is often equated to 'society'. This, of course, is an 'ideological' construct, as in all cases of 'society', which nevertheless has a far-reaching performative capacity. It is thus stated that there exists 'unrest' within society over a specific occurrence of violence

or over the supposed increase in cases of violence. The awareness of a social problem such as violence is said to 'live' in society. In such discourse, the idea of a general growth of violence neither plays the role of eliciting discussion concerning its truth – since ordinary people have no means of reaching a conclusion on this point – nor does it serve to justify the settlement of policy goals. Rather, in public discourse, the idea that violence grows has a paradoxical therapeutic function. In nine out of 20 silent marches reported by Boutellier (2000), empathy was mentioned as a motive for joining in on the march; another motive was anger and powerlessness. Much mentioned were contemplative motives pertaining to questions of norms and values, to the question whether violence can make or have 'sense' at all, and to respect, tolerance and the like (Boutellier, 2000: 325–6). The idea of growing violence, canalized through reference to 'senseless violence', can be argued to provide people with a cognitive frame, a description of reality that orders perception and sublimates some of the insecurity experienced by those participating. Something about 'senseless violence' can be understood after all . . . .

Several kinds of therapeutic actions have been undertaken in light of the disapproval of senseless violence and the supposed general proliferation of violence in society. This has resulted in an *institutionalization of anxiety* in the sense that many civil actions against 'senseless violence' have lead to the formation of formal organizations. In Bergen op Zoom, for instance, all babies born from 2003 to 2006 received a bib from the mayor of the town, carrying the slogan 'Bergen op Zoom against Senseless Violence'.[3] The bibs furthermore were decorated with ladybirds, the official logo of the Dutch National Foundation Against Senseless Violence (Landelijke Stichting Tegen Zinloos Geweld). According to its website, the ladybird is 'the symbol against senseless violence'.[4] This organization seeks the prevention of violence, since 'Everybody sees that violence and aggression are used too easily.' Its founding member is 'fed up' with 'beastly attacks out of nothing'. What it hopes to accomplish through its actions is a 'structural change of mentality'. Other foundations and groups organized around the theme of violence are numerous, including the 'Stappen tegen Geweld' Foundation (now dissolved), Action Front Against Senseless Violence (possibly dissolved), the Day Against Violence Foundation, the Art Against Violence Action Committee, the Gorcum Against Violence Foundation, the Association of Parents of a Murdered Child, the Tolerance Unlimited Foundation, the Vlaardingen Against Senseless Violence Foundation, the Safe Groningen Foundation, the Foundation for Active Nonviolence, the 'Kappen nou!' Foundation, the From Senseless Violence to Sensible Behaviour Foundation, the 'Aandacht doet spreken' Foundation, the Wall Against Violence Foundation (currently part of the Association for Safety, Respect and Solidarity), the Stop

Senseless Violence Foundation, the 'Report Violence' Foundation, the Victims of Violence Foundation and the governmental National Platform Against Violence in the Streets (possibly dissolved). In 2000, 19 such organizations started working together under the umbrella title of the National Organization for Safety and Respect (LOVR). In addition, apart from the organizations mentioned above, several websites have been set up. Some examples are: Twenthe tegen Geweld, which is part of Tegen geweld,[5] De Trucker Tegen Zinloos Geweld (dissolved),[6] Slachtoffers van Geweld (dissolved), Zinloos Geweld Forum,[7] Kids Against Violence,[8] No More Violence[9] (a web forum) and Tilburgers tegen Zinloos Geweld.[10]

Meanwhile, the Netherlands has erected many monuments in memory of victims of such senseless violence. Amsterdam has a plaque and a tile, Leeuwarden a boulder, Sleeuwijk has a golden tear, the Hague has a traffic sign against senseless violence,[11] Vlaardingen has a memorial monument,[12] as do – to name a few – Tilburg and the village of Vinkel, and Arnhem hosts the national monument for victims of senseless violence (a plaque with ladybirds).[13] Other events of a therapeutic nature that have been held include a pillow fight of 400 children in Amsterdam,[14] unrolling a 6-kilometre long banner against senseless violence in Breda (which, due to lack of public interest – only 50 people showed up – was only unrolled for 300 metres),[15] singing against senseless violence and the release of a protest CD.[16] There has been DJ-ing against senseless violence and there is currently still partying against senseless violence for which famous DJs are booked.[17] There has been rapping against senseless violence,[18] pills against senseless violence have been sold at a dance festival,[19] there have been more music festivals and survival-runs,[20] and there has even been a boxing match against senseless violence between an ex-professional fighter and a protestant minister in a church in Grevenbicht.[21] Apart from all this, and apart from the occasional 'noisy march' against violence,[22] the 'silent marches' have become the most common expression of public disapproval after incidents of so-called 'senseless violence'. These have taken place in – to name a few – Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Zoetermeer, Kerkrade, Leeuwarden, Vlaardingen, Noordwijk, Venlo, Almere, Den Haag and Gorinchem. Boutellier (2000) counts 20 marches in roughly four years (1996–2000) (one of which was attended by an estimated 20,000 people). Local support groups against violence exist throughout the Netherlands. In 2000, school children regarded 'senseless violence' as the main news topic of the previous year. In a poll in the same year, the increase in 'senseless violence' was reported as the greatest concern among Dutch people (65 per cent), ahead of damage to the environment and the gap between rich and poor.[23] Clearly, there exists a certain anxiety concerning violence, and a concern that violence is growing is present in all the reactions to occasions of 'senseless violence' mentioned here. Most common are the

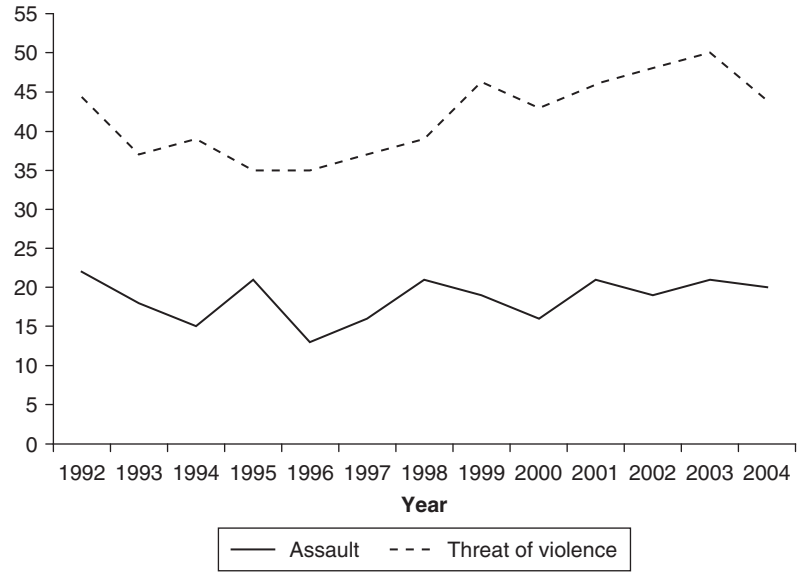

Figure 1 *Trends in Victims of Assault and the Threat of Violence 1992–2004*
Source: CBS, adapted from SCP (2006: 37).

silent marches, in which at times a few thousand people have participated (Boutellier, 2000). To conclude, while measurements of fear of violent crime do not show an increase during the 1990s, several forms of civil action do indicate a high level of concern and anxiety over what is called 'senseless violence'. What justifies the label of 'moral panic' is in particular the role of the media in reporting and, subsequently, performatively orchestrating such civil action.

Violence and the Media: Developing the Moral Panic

In this article, it is presupposed that there need not be a linear relationship between actual violence or, better yet, actual insecurity, and experienced insecurity. Research shows that the relation between the actual development of violence and the feelings and anxiety about an increase in violence is ambiguous, to say the least (see CBS, 2003; Wittebrood, 2001; Wittebrood and Junger, 1999). Social scientific debate about the development of violence is undecided. However, in the case of a moral panic over 'senseless violence', it is relevant to take stock of the development in victim numbers. Since 'senseless violence' is above all associated with assault and threat, victim numbers in these categories are presented in Figure 1 for the period 1992–2004.

It is clear from Figure 1 that the Dutch did not report significantly higher victim rates during the last decade. Reported[24] numbers of actual assault fluctuated and did not reach the 1992 level of 22 assaults per 1000 people again. Violent threats fluctuated and rose between 1995 and 2003, but eventually settled in 2004 at 1992 levels of 44 threats per 1000 people. Attention given to 'senseless violence' cannot therefore be a consequence of a rising experience of violence. Yet, one might argue that attention to 'senseless violence' is related to the number of cases of murder and manslaughter. After all, if the number of severe violent crimes rises significantly, this has an effect on the public perception of violence. Yet the number of cases of murder and manslaughter has remained steady at around 1.1 and 1.2 cases per 100,000 people (SCP, 2006: 39). Therefore, I believe it is warranted to say that the ambiguity of the relation between victim rates and institutionalized forms of anxiety over 'senseless violence' has to be attributed to an important selective system within the public domain: the media. Here, the *topoi* of public discourse are preselected and are reinserted into public discourse, where they were supposedly initiated. Theories of moral panic tend to have a problem relating the media to public life, as if the media can be separated from a larger social reality (Hunt, 1997). Without venturing a theory of that relationship here, I take the relationship between the media and public to be one of mutual resonance. In practice, this usually means that the media either invent topics out of an instinct for the appeal of such issues among the public, or they pick up on a localized theme and blow it up to national proportions, thereby still being able to say that they only report what 'lives among the people'. Once one violent event attracts attention in the media, other media have to follow suit, as Bourdieu shows in his analysis of the field of journalism. It is the *logos* of that field that a 'scoop' is searched for. The inevitable economic competition among the media necessitates allocation of attention in favour of subjects that gain attention among competitors (Bourdieu, 1998).

An analysis of media coverage of Dutch cases of violence shows how the two aspects of the silent marches, the emotional and the rational, are combined in the media (Althoff, 2002). On the one hand, the victim's perspective is taken, with all the experience of contingency attached to it. On the other hand, 'analyses' are given of the 'increasing aggression and violence'. The concept of 'senseless violence' then combines these aspects in providing a sense to something that has the emotional effect of a lack of sense or understanding. Mark Fishman has made an illuminating analysis of such media coverage. He, like Bourdieu, is concerned with the interaction of the media with other media (Fishman, 1973). As he says: 'thus, *the behaviour of each news organization during the crime wave seems to have been in response to the other media*' (Fishman, 1973: 102; emphasis in original).

Similarly, Cohen states: 'the mass communication of the news of one outbreak is a condition of structural conduciveness for the development of a hostile belief' (Cohen, 1973: 453). Thus, a 'sensitization' takes place which, according to Cohen, can lead to an actual 'amplification of violence'. In the case of 'senseless violence', the latter point cannot be argued (one can count Mods and Rocker clashes, but not cases of 'senseless violence'; one can only count what *counts* as such).

Cohen (1972) mentions three features of media behaviour in moral panics that are also present in this case: (1) exaggeration and distortion (or 'overreporting'), (2) prediction and (3) symbolization. Overreporting in the sense in which Cohen refers to it can be said to exist in the way that one case triggered a massive coverage whereas previous cases did not – in fact, these cases were dug up and reported on *ex post facto*. That the death of Meindert Tjoelker in 1997 triggered the moral panic revolving around senseless violence becomes evident when media coverage of 'senseless violence' is taken into consideration. Table 1 shows the number of times 'senseless violence' appeared in the title of a newspaper article in the largest Dutch newspapers, as well as the number of times it appeared in the body of the text. It indicates that 1997 clearly marks the start of the moral panic.

Similarly, one can trace the number of times 'senseless violence' was a topic in television programmes. Table 2 shows such numbers for the Dutch public broadcasting stations. Because of the higher competitive drive and the higher level of populist content, one could expect the content of commercial stations to have been more attentive to 'senseless violence', but unfortunately, no data were available on the commercial broadcasting stations.

The second feature Cohen mentions, prediction, became apparent in two ways. First, reports about 'senseless violence' were very often accompanied by references to the idea that violence in general was growing. Second, reports about 'senseless violence' were quite often *about* violence in general, not concerning specific experiences. Althoff, for instance, quotes a train conductor who says: 'it could happen to you, that you get grabbed in the crotch or get a knife against your throat'. The newspaper article adds: 'not that such an occurrence happens often. The worst he [the train conductor] had encountered was being spat at' (Althoff, 2002: 271). Another example of prediction can be found on the website of the National Foundation Against Senseless Violence, whose founder writes on the occasion of the founding of the organization in 1997:

> One minute of silence is not enough.
>
> Another victim of senseless violence. Newspapers were full of it. Everyone on the radio and on television talked about it. But the day after the noise had half

Table 1 *Number of Times 'Senseless Violence' Mentioned in Printed News Press*

Year	Number of times 'senseless violence' in title	Number of times 'senseless violence' in text
1990	0	0
1991	0	0
1992	0	0
1993	0	6
1994	2	12
1995	1	8
1996	1	18
1997	18	154
1998	37	349
1999	45	541
2000	67	539
2001	22	331
2002	19	390
2003	28	449
2004	23	437
2005	21	350
2006[a]	2	119

Source: LexisNexis Academic.

[a] Up to June.

Hits not pertaining to the phenomenon 'senseless violence' deleted (e.g. in case of war or terrorism). Some hits may contain discussion of 'media hypes' over 'senseless violence'. These were not deleted, since they too, unlike other usage of the words 'senseless violence', can be seen as part of the moral panic as they are part of what is set in motion by the appearance of the phenomenon of 'senseless violence'. Moreover, they often accept the fact that violence is on the rise and that 'senseless violence' is a daily occurring phenomenon. See, for instance 'Fatsoenrakkerij' (*De Volkskrant*, 18 August 2000: 9).

> died away and the next day all was quiet. It was no longer news for the masses, only for one or two individuals. First, another victim has to fall. Then we will observe another minute of silence. And then everyone will talk about it again. Until the rumour dies away again.[25]

Thus, 'victims' fall as part of a larger phenomenon that will reccur unless action is undertaken. For the initiators of the Stop Senseless Violence Foundation, the 'disruption of society' caused by 'senseless violence' has been the main reason for their organization.[26] What is specifically striking about the moral panic surrounding 'senseless violence' is the *conspicuous absence of moral deviants*. While 'senseless violence' is

Table 2 *Number of Times 'Senseless Violence' Mentioned in Television Programmes*

Year	Number of times 'senseless violence' in programme[a]
1990	0
1991	0
1992	0
1993	0
1994	0
1995	3
1996	2
1997	23
1998	45
1999	60
2000	54
2001	23
2002	51
2003	18
2004	17
2005	15

Source: Nederlands Instituut voor Beeld en Geluid.
[a] Not including commercial stations.
Hits not pertaining to the phenomenon 'senseless violence' were deleted (e.g. in case of war or terrorism).

frequently associated with the issue of 'norms and values' – as for instance becomes clear from the references made by various civic organizations against 'senseless violence' to 'norms and values' – no moral deviants, no perpetrators of 'senseless violence' are publicly exposed. Cases of 'senseless violence' are remembered by the names of their victims; names of perpetrators don't live on in public memory, some haven't been made public at all.[27] No 'category' of perpetrators of 'senseless violence' has been discerned and identified as 'folk devils'. The issue has survived in the absence of perpetrators, as a threat that regularly comes down upon highly publicized *victims*, but which, as a threat, remains abstract, unknown yet certain to resurface, and thereby all the more fearsome. In the new introduction to *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (2002), Cohen does give some tools to interpret this. He analyses some recent moral panics, as well as a near panic, and stresses the importance of (1) a suitable enemy, (2) a suitable victim and (3) 'a consensus that the beliefs or action being denounced were not insulated entities ("it's not only this") but integral parts of the society or else could (and would) be unless

"something was done"' (Cohen, 2002: xi). That, in the case of 'senseless violence', the third condition has already been satisfied has been illustrated earlier in this article. The first condition, the suitable enemy, is absent when a particular group or category is meant here. But in Cohen's original definition of a moral panic, he defines it as something in which 'an episode, condition, person or group of persons' that is or are 'defined as a threat to societal values and interests' (Cohen, 1972: 9). In this case, the 'violent condition' of society is the enemy. No perpetrators are denounced; people's outrage is directed at the condition of violence growing in society. On the other hand, this is only successful when the second condition is satisfied, i.e. when 'suitable victims' are present. And they are, since most victims of 'senseless violence' are white middle-class young men. In fact, these victims are part of the same category that perpetrates acts labelled as 'senseless violence', although this fact is not recounted in attention to 'senseless violence' (WODC, 2006; cf. Best, 1999).

Finally, Cohen mentions symbolization as part of the media coverage during a moral panic. In the case of 'senseless violence', the most effective symbolization is attained by the label 'senseless'. This entails connotations of irrationality, of unnecessary and hence disproportionate violence, which cannot be understood unless it be classified as 'senseless' and its perpetrators devoid of 'sense'. Symbolization furthermore took the form of medicalized analogies. Thus, 'senseless violence' was pathologized and its perpetrators were 'sick', which is a last resort in the case of actions hard to classify or understand. Similarly, 'senseless violence' came to be seen as an 'epidemic'. After the violent death of Daniël van Cotthem in January 2000, when an estimated 20,000 people attended a silent march, local newspaper *Zwolse Courant* ran with the headline: 'Epidemic of Senseless Violence'. It opened its coverage of the death with: 'throughout the entire country, the police made arrests this weekend as a result of senseless violence'.[28] Generally speaking, 'senseless violence' is regarded as a token of societal disruption or disintegration. In a graph produced by the From Senseless Violence to Sensible Behaviour Foundation, for instance, it is associated with racism, money, power, fascism, budget cuts, crime, poverty, divorce, war, natural disasters and numerous other factors depicted as pulling the earth apart (along with things like 'love', 'marriage', 'discussion' and other positively valued factors possibly intended to glue it back together again).[29]

It is thus warranted to say that, starting in 1997, a 'deviancy amplification spiral' (Cohen, 1972) took off that has only relatively recently appeared to slow down. Cohen uses this concept to denote the cycle in which the media increasingly report on an issue involving deviant behaviour. In a similar vein, albeit in a more general sense, Bourdieu (1998) speaks of a 'circular circulation' of news, meaning that journalists mimic

each other in keeping up with what's 'hot' in the news. Thus, a self-reinforcing process is set in motion. The dependence of journalists on other journalists on what news is, is what brings about a certain synchronization of news coverage. In the case of Tjoelker, public dissatisfaction picked up on by journalists rather arbitrarily set off a boost in media attention to similar cases – in accordance with the 'consistency rule' in the media (Fishman, 1973: 106). This indicates that the three possible origins of moral panic described by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) fall somewhat short. The intrinsic organization of the media is such that a moral panic can be seen to occur for all the reasons they distinguish plus the competitive drive for news that pushes media coverage to induce, in its turn, grassroots and interest-group responses.

The Political Context of 'Senseless Violence'

'Senseless violence' in particular, and the idea of the growth of violence in general, resonates in various contexts. Having discussed the institutionalization of anxiety in grassroots movements, public discourse and the media, it is relevant to conclude with the consequences of this moral panic in the context of the political system.

In the politics, public anxiety first of all gives rise to the political (re)definition of 'social problems'. Violence is regarded as a 'vexing and anxiety-arousing problem' (Bauman, 2000). Violence then becomes further embedded in the political agenda and thus becomes a topic of increasing relevance within the political system. Not only does public anxiety become a relevant factor in the political system, but politicians now need to enter public discourse as well. Politicians have to 'talk to the people', they need to walk at the head of silent marches, which displays their concern and commitment, but at the same time painfully reveals their powerlessness. After all, what more can a mayor in the end do than distribute bibs to babies? The next time someone is killed, he or she will necessarily be too late, again. In the Netherlands, politicians have been relatively absent fromthe moral panic over 'senseless violence'. In fact, this can be mentioned as a reason for the institutionalization of civil forms of anxiety, since politicians are conceived as not doing enough, and civilians therefore need to organize themselves against the threats. The same has been argued in Belgium, with respect to a comparable phenomenon involving 'white marches' (Hooghe, 1998).

This, however, combined with the paradoxical nature of anxiety, presents politics with a double-bind. For if politicians don't pay due attention to violence, they are accused of disinterest and of not taking the people seriously. This is one side of the double-bind. The other, equally unattractive, consists of politically going along with the subjects of public

discourse. What happens then is that politicians 'taking the people seriously' by paying due attention to the assumed cause of their anxiety run the risk of only adding to that anxiety by doing so. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that fear is best forgotten and, when paid attention to, only increases. On the other hand, this can be attributed to the powerlessness of politicians against relatively random (in the 'loose' sense of 'difficult to predict') acts of interpersonal violence. Their increased attention to the problem then only makes them look increasingly ineffective and unfit to do the job. In the face of the anxiety caused by public images of a young man beaten to death for no apparent reason, politicians' exclamations denouncing such acts stand out as shallow and meaningless. The result among the population is the mantra of 'politicians don't care', 'politicians are incapable', 'politicians are out of touch with everyday life' or 'they do nothing in the Hague'. In the same person, appreciation of politicians' engagement can even go hand in hand with doubts concerning their capabilities. Politicians of course always have the possibility of referring to police responsibility, but this still means that the charge of being uninterested can be made against them, and this strategy easily turns itself back against politics anyway, since the police are burdened by efficiency targets that are politically decided and that leave little room for difficult cases such as the 'whodunnit' in cases of 'senseless violence'. When police are operating under politically specified measures of efficiency and effectiveness, such cases don't pay off – the investment in time these cases necessitate only means the police won't reach their efficiency goals, which makes them look bad. If, then, politicians accuse the police of a lack of interest in cases of 'senseless violence', a counter-accusation is ready at hand.

Given the relation between public anxiety and publicity of politicians' efforts to solve the problem, the latter are faced with a second double-bind, since their political survival depends in part on public knowledge of their achievements. Loïc Wacquant has suggested that political attention to law enforcement in general is a result of the 'deficit in legitimacy' facing contemporary western democratic politics (Wacquant, 2001: 402). Be that as it may, such attention is unlikely to cover for that deficit. For communication to the public concerning political measures that effectively reduce violent crime may well, at times of heightened anxiety, have the unforeseen effect of increasing public anxiety about the issue – since any communication about violent crime, positive or negative, has the potential to increase public anxiety; while non-communication of political efficacy is punished by the public either by accusations of political disinterest, since nothing is going on in the political arena, or quite simply by the fact that politicians anyway have a hard time benefiting politically from their policy achievements. At times of lower public anxiety, then, politicians face the problem that policy successes have to be communicated through the

media, and the media are primarily interested in putting out communications that relate to public anxiety. At a time of little public anxiety, policy achievements are an entirely unattractive topic for the media and therefore for the public also. This could well have been the case in the Dutch elections of 2002, where the PvdA (Labour Party) was defeated after eight consecutive years of government, being accused of detachment from the public while being unable to benefit politically from policy achievements. And this was despite the party's claim that there had been a *decrease* in violence during the time it was in office. While during elections political parties make security a top-priority subject, for ruling parties, this can also have negative consequences. This may well be a reason why, as one criminologist notes not without surprise, the biggest political parties *do not* mention the word 'senseless violence', or even the prototypical form of this violence: violence on the streets (Brants, 2002: 10).

Leading criminologists have noted that politicians' decisions regarding crime in general are not informed by criminological insights, but rather by emotional reactions on the part of the public (Garland and Sparks, 2000). Based on the existence of 'senseless violence', there could, for instance, be justification for measures towards more repressive prosecution of violent crime in the courts, as has happened in the Netherlands.[30] A growing concern over violent crime was one of the defining factors leading to the remarkable ascent of new political parties that were structured 'bottom up', and that explicitly reproached the 'power games of the Hague'. The LPF, named after its eccentric leader Pim Fortuyn, was said to channel political unrest and dissatisfaction with the established political spectrum. It advocated (and still advocates) 'more, higher, and faster punishments'.[31] In this case, however, after the death of its leader and its participation in government , the LPF was neutralized and accepted the terms of established politics. However, current policy and political parties have incorporated much of the focus on law and order that Fortuyn perpetuated. It is now the conventional political parties that have adopted the label of 'new politics', explicitly moving beyond 'political correctness'. This has been achieved mostly by coming across as repressive on issues of migration, integration and crime. In short, 'senseless violence' is one issue that spurred a focus on repressive policies towards crime. The relative absence of extreme right parties in the Netherlands has been explained by the fact that on issues of law and order, conventional parties have incorporated populist issues (see Scheepers et al., 2003). Dutch policy on crime has been a combination of repressive and preventive strategies since the policy statement 'Society and Crime' (*Samenleving en Criminaliteit*) in 1985. Increasingly, the repressive side of this policy has become dominant, especially since 2000. The 2002 statement 'Towards a Safer Society' (*Naar een veiliger samenleving*) is indicative of an increasing focus on police and

prison efficacy. Likewise, Uit Beijerse and Van Swaaningen (2005) have signalled an increasing focus on public order in the budgeting priorities of the Department of Justice, most significantly so in 2003. That the height of the moral panic over 'senseless violence' in the media fell around 2002–3 can therefore tentatively be regarded as related to the relative harshness of policy statements on crime since 2002. The institutionalization of anxiety over 'senseless violence' has in all likelihood been one factor in perpetuating a trend towards rightist and repressive policies on crime and justice.

Conclusion: After the Anxiety

Public anxiety can be fed by the kinds of 'risk management' it instigates: 'insurance is now part of a politics of choice and lifestyle, sold through market mechanisms, and promoted through consumerized dreams of desired futures, which thrive on the reciprocal – if often implicit – exacerbation of anxiety' (Rose, 2000: 192). Apparently, out of the blue, one case of violence may instigate a popular discourse that can have consequences in many different arenas. Quite often, the effects of this will be first felt within politics. In politics, this poses the dilemma of a double-bind in which politicians, whatever they do or don't do, are easily accused of doing the wrong thing. Luckily for politicians in that situation, severe public anxiety doesn't last long, since it is inextricably linked with the *logos* of the media, which constantly need to attract and therefore operate under continuous pressure to generate new 'scoops'. Social problems come in waves that are largely driven by drama and the possibility of keeping the tension high when compared to other social problems (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988: 61–4, 70–2). Even communication about 'senseless violence' at times turns stale and loses its 'sex appeal'. It then becomes conceivable that, after great citizen involvement in a raft of protests, in the end only 50 people show up to unfurl a 6-kilometre long banner against 'senseless violence'. The *institutionalization of anxiety*, as I have called it, leads to a long aftermath of the moral panic over 'senseless violence'. Now, the concept 'senseless violence' has been established as part of Dutch vocabulary. It has found its way into authoritative thesauruses and encyclopaedias.

Meanwhile, as a public issue, 'senseless violence' yields its place to other symbolic issues, such as the supposed links between Islamic extremism and terrorism. The institutionalization of anxiety then leads to forms of goal displacement. As indicated, the concept of 'senseless violence' is now expanding. Apart from the added import of the concept of extremism, one domain it has also incorporated is that of bullying in schools.[32] Websites on 'senseless violence' are broadening their scope. One

site also propagates 'direct democracy' and begs attention to the violence of wars all over the world, as well as to the June 2006 Java earthquake and the earlier earthquake in Pakistan.[33] One web log, also carrying the ladybird that has become the 'official' anti-'senseless violence' logo, claims to combat 'online violence'.[34] An online web forum against 'senseless violence' (Zinloos Geweld Forum) lists as categories of discussion alongside 'violence in sports' and 'violence when going out': 'sexual violence', 'domestic violence', 'animal maltreatment' and 'discrimination'.[35] As the Stop Senseless Violence Foundation claims: 'unfortunately, senseless violence occurs everywhere; in domestic life: incest, child abuse, physical and psychic maltreatment of young and old'.[36] The biggest organization against 'senseless violence' – the Dutch National Foundation Against Senseless Violence – has joined forces with Oxfam and Amnesty International to protest against the worldwide proliferation of arms.[37] This bears relevance for the notion of moral panic in the sense that the institutionalization of anxiety produces an aftermath that should no longer be seen as part of the moral panic itself, but as a consequence thereof. Institutionalized civic initiatives against 'senseless violence' are part of the strength of a moral panic. They survive when that panic is on a high, or they find new goals, or, in most cases, dissipate. Their life-span is limited unless they are united under a general banner such as that of the National Organization for Safety and Respect (LOVR), or are heavily supported financially like the National Foundation Against Senseless Violence. In either case, while dissipation is avoided, it means the total disappearance of institutionalized forms of anxiety over 'senseless violence'. In time, what remains is a concept added to that public vocabulary that is unlikely to be of use during new moral panics.

Notes

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1. www.zinloosgewelddieren.nl/index.php (accessed 7 June 2006).
2. www.zinloosgeweld.nl (accessed 7 June 2006).
3. 'Baby vecht tegen zinloos geweld' (*Het Parool*, 30 July 2003: 3); 'Slabbetjes tegen zinloos geweld' (*Algemeen Dagblad*, 30 July 2003: 1).
4. www.zinloosgeweld.nl (accessed 7 June 2006).
5. gjmbrouwer.tegengeweld.nl/ (accessed 7 June 2006).
6. www.detrucker.tegengeweld.nl/ (accessed 7 June 2006).
7. www.zinloosgeweldforum.nl/ (accessed 7 June 2006).
8. www.kidstegengeweld.nl/index.php?&m=1 (accessed 7 June 2006).
9. members.lycos.nl/nomoreviolence/ (accessed 7 June 2006).
10. www.tilburgerstegenzinloosgeweld.nl (accessed 7 June 2006).

11. 'Met "verkeersbord" in actie tegen zinloos geweld' (*Haagsche Courant*, 31 March 2005).
12. 'Monument tegen zinloos geweld' (*Trouw*, 3 March 2001: 3).
13. 'Nationaal Monument Zinloos Geweld verrast' (*De Volkskrant*, 24 January 2003: 6); 'Stoeptegel "tegenzinloos geweld"' (*Het Parool*, 20 December 2001: 2).
14. 'Kussengevecht als protest tegen zinloos geweld' (*De Volkskrant*, 11 February 2002: 2). This pillow fight was part of the project Kids Against Violence.
15. 'Zes kilometer spandoek tegen zinloos geweld blijft opgerold' (*De Volkskrant*, 23 April 2001: 3).
16. 'Klaske Ferwerda zingt tegen zinloos geweld' (*Algemeen Dagblad*, 28 April 2000: 2). And, on another occasion: 'Zingen tegen zinloos geweld' (*NRC Handelsblad*, 26 January 2000: 2).
17. www.draaientegenzinloosgeweld.nl/ (accessed 7 June 2006).
18. 'Jongeren rappend aanspreken over zinloos geweld' (*De Volkskrant*, 13 January 2005: 3).
19. 'Pil tegen zinloos geweld op Tilburgs dancefestijn' (*Planet Internet Nieuws,* 15 September 2003; at: www.planet.nl).
20. www.zinloosgeweld.nl (accessed 7 June 2006).
21. 'Boksen in kerk tegen zinloos geweld' (*De Volkskrant*, 10 April 2000: 24).
22. 'Baby vecht tegen zinloos geweld' (*Het Parool*, 30 July 2003: 3).
23. 'Zinloos geweld is grootste zorg van Nederlanders' (*De Volkskrant*, 4 January 2002: 7).
24. 'Reported' in the sense of 'reported in a survey of victim numbers', not in the sense of 'reported to the police'.
25. www.zinloosgeweld.nl (accessed 7 June 2006).
26. www.stopzinloosgeweld.nl/ (accessed 7 June 2006).
27. Some are unknown, most have been made public, with last names abbreviated.
28. 'Een epidemie van zinloos geweld' (*Zwolse Courant*, 17 January 2000).
29. www.zinvolgedrag.nl/content/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14&Itemid=30 (accessed 7 June 2006).
30. 'Meer straf bij zinloos geweld' (*Algemeen Dagblad*, 26 October 2001: 3); 'Zwaarder straffen lost niets op' (*Algemeen Dagblad*, 17 January 1997: 9); Brants (2002: 11). See also the party manifestos of the largest governing political parties in the Netherlands: CDA, *Betrokken samenleving, betrouwbare overheid* (2002); VVD, *Ruimte, respect en vooruitgang* (2002).
31. See its election manifesto 2003–7: *Politiek is Passie*.
32. www.zinloosgeweld.nl (accessed 7 June 2006).
33. wijken.tegengeweld.nl/homepage/show/pagina.php?paginaid=22024 (accessed 7 June 2006).
34. www.stoponlinegeweld.web-log.nl/ (accessed 7 June 2006).
35. www.zinloosgeweldforum.nl/ (accessed 7 June 2006).
36. www.stopzinloosgeweld.nl/ (accessed 7 June 2006).
37. www.wapenjezelfmetwoorden.nl/ (accessed 7 June 2006).

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