Cultural Precursors and Psychological Consequences of Contemporary Western Responses to Acts of Terror

Bill Durodié

International Centre for Security Analysis, King's College London, Strand,
London WC2R 2LS, UK

Introduction

This article explores what the response to the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 teaches us about Western society today. There has been a wealth of research examining the purported cultural background and psychology of the perpetrators of those events [1]. That focus has two main rationales; to identify and deal with potential terrorists, and to begin to tackle what are considered to be the 'root causes' of terrorism – usually held to stem from poverty and disaffection across the Third World [2]. These approaches offer a somewhat predictable and reassuring explanation of events. They locate the problem of terrorism elsewhere – in the minds, actions and cultures of others. At best, those posing a threat are understood to be reacting in an adverse way to what are held to have been the injustices committed against their forebears during an earlier age of imperial domination.

Here, I wish to consider the extent to which some of the issues may be far closer to home, and more contemporary, than we like to envisage. In part, this is due to the particular way in which Western societies perceive and deal with anything that involves risk nowadays [3]. If anything, the actual threats posed could be conceived of as weaker today than those presented throughout most of the Cold War, yet society appears to react as if they were stronger. Why is this? And what does this tell us about ourselves? A focus on our increasingly exaggerated perceptions of risk and the adverse consequences this brings, both to the people of the Third World and for Western societies, is a missing element to our analysis of terrorism that we ignore at our peril.

Ultimately, if our responses are shaped, in part at least, through the prism of our own domestic fears and insecurities, then the actions taken will prove limited or ineffective, and may serve to confuse matters more. A mystifying mythology is created, which in its turn demands totemic gestures to reassure the public. This process, readily becomes a self-fulfilling fantasy which – far from assuaging our concerns – will only drive them further.

Inverting Questions

Just as there are two sides to every coin, so occasionally we need to invert the questions we ask of society if we are to obtain a more balanced and productive take on issues.

For example, the recent fashion to re-examine Samuel Huntington's work on, 'The Clash of Civilisations' [4], in the light of 9/11, would do well to be moderated with an equally vigorous examination as to the possibility of a clash within civilisation, rather than between differing cultures. This would need to address the radicalisation of Muslims within western societies, but more importantly, for those wanting to get to the real roots of this phenomenon, to assess and analyse the largely Western origins of anti-Western ideas.

In this vein, rather than recording so-called anti-American sentiment across the world today [5], we would do well to examine how such attitudes have developed closer to home. After all, more anti-capitalist protestors come from Seattle than from Gaza. The rejection of once core social values, such as ambition, success and development, and their representation as arrogant, selfish and dangerous, reaches its apogee in relation to the US – the most advanced capitalist nation. This rejection is reflected in a growing self-loathing evident in American culture and that of other Western societies, as expressed for instance in Oscar-winning Michael Moore's best-seller 'Stupid White Men' [6].

Another assumption worth exploring in a more rounded way, is that of the need to understand why it is that a small proportion of Asian youth appear to be attracted to fringe Islamist organisations. It may prove more productive to ask, why it is that a small element of Asian youth, and quite a few others beside, fail to find any sense of solidarity or purpose within Western society [7].

Surely, it is an indictment of our own culture that its lack of direction and dynamism, fails to attract and inspire ambitious young people? It is not the magnetism of those who supposedly seek to restore a twelfth-century caliphate in the twenty-first century that should concern us. Rather, it is a failing of our own society that it does not project clearly a vision of its own future to argue against those who would have us live in the past. It fails thereby, to command loyalty, or to impart any sense of mission or meaning.

Instead of examining the presumed culture and psychology of those who perpetrate acts of terror, this article focuses upon those selfsame factors in relation to our societies and to ourselves. To what extent are we truly facing a new phenomenon, encompassing new technologies with unforeseen consequences? Or, is it we who have changed – including our individual attitudes to danger, the coherence of our institutions and our sense of social solidarity and resilience?

Diminished Selves

The extent to which, once core, social affiliations and bonds have been eroded without replacement over recent decades is striking. We should be alert to the possibility of this producing some unexpected consequences.

At the formal level, people in advanced Western societies are increasingly unlikely to participate in the political process. Nor are they as likely to be active – or even passive – members of political parties or trade unions in the same way that their forebears were. There is, of course, more to democracy than merely casting your vote, but even when people do vote, it is often on a negative basis – against an incumbent – rather than for their replacement. These trends are also most marked amongst the young.

At the informal level, some changes are even more notable. Many have commented on the growing pressures faced by communities, neighbourhoods and families. In 'Bowl-

ing Alone', the US academic Robert Putnam pointed to the demise of informal clubs and associations [8]. Meeting with friends occurs less frequently than previously, too. This loss of, what has sometimes been coined, social capital, has occurred within a remarkably short period of time.

A generation ago it was quite normal to send children to school on their own, assuming that other adults would act in loco parentis – chastising them if they misbehaved, and helping them if they were in need. Today, across many urban areas, this can no longer be assumed to hold. None of us ever signed a contract saying that we would look after other people's children. It was simply an unstated and self-evident social good. Sadly, this erosion of communal bonds has, in its turn, made the job of parenting harder still [9].

So, as well as being liberated by the erosion of traditional rules and structures over recent decades, we should note that, without anything to replace these, we have also become more isolated from one another and less effective in consequence. Far from this erosion of old community values necessarily giving rise to a new, confident individualism, what we have seen is the emergence of a disconnecting process of individuation. In the past, social networks and norms may have imposed arbitrary or authoritarian structures and rules upon people, but they also provided meaning, conferred identity, and facilitated basic processes, without which we have become greatly diminished as individuals [10].

Being less connected has also left people less corrected. It has allowed their subjective impressions of reality to go unchecked, unmediated or unmoderated through membership of a wider group or association. In the past, when confronting difficulties, people would, through their social networks, have been encouraged to view things more objectively, or at least from a different perspective. They could also have envisaged a collective solution to their problems. Nowadays, personal obsessions readily grow into all-consuming worldviews that are rarely open to reasoned interrogation or resolution. We may be more aware than previous generations, but we are also easier to scare, as we are increasingly alone in facing life's challenges. Notably, it is this erosion of informal social bonds that has led to their having to be replaced by more formal processes of blaming and claiming [11].

Thus, a narrowly self-oriented personality and culture has emerged alongside a growing sense of isolation and insecurity. In some ways, we have replaced a culture of unthinking deference by one of unnecessary fear. It seems that confident individuals need a coherent society to fall back on, just as much as a coherent society requires confident individuals to build from.

Risk Aversion

Above-all though, this process of individuation has encouraged an exaggeration of the threats and challenges posed by everyday life. This has manifested itself as a growing obsession with, and aversion towards, all-manner of risks, both new and old. Risk has become a dominant prism for viewing the world today, as evidenced by the number of courses, conferences and journals now devoted to the concept. This outlook emerged gradually, but was catapulted to prominence through the break-up of the Cold War order, coinciding with the publication of the German sociologist, Ulrich Beck's book, Risk Society [12].

The Aids-awareness campaigns of the 1980s were an early indicator of changing perceptions of risk. In the UK, these became much clearer in the debacle over bovine spongiform encephalopathy (or BSE), more commonly referred to as 'mad cow disease' [13]. Since that time there have been a steady stream of risk-related issues impinging upon public consciousness. These have included campaigns against the presumed adverse consequences of introducing genetically modified organisms into the environment, and concerns over the use of mobile phones held to have possible effects on the brain through so-called non-thermal radiation [14]. More recently the MMR (measles-mumps-rubella) triple-vaccine, was accused by some, despite a lack of confirming evidence, to be linked to autism in infants [15].

Nor was it just scientific and technological risk-related matters that came to prominence. Age-old activities and problems have also been reinterpreted and reorganised around a heightened consciousness of risk. Bullying in schools, sun-bathing, child abduction, untrustworthy GPs, and the very food we eat, have all, at one time or another, formed part of a growing panoply of issues one can point to, of fears raised over recent years.

Risk management as a discipline has therefore become a major discourse and organising activity, in both the public and the private sector [16]. Risk managers sit on the board of major companies [17]. Even relationships are now increasingly viewed through the distorting and stultifying prism of risk. Despite concerns raised as to the broader implications and consequences of this, there is an almost unstoppable trend to reinterpret all issues – whether personal, social or scientific – in this way.

But, rather than the world changing any faster today than in the past, or becoming a more dangerous, unforeseeable or complex place, it may be our diminished, and more isolated, sense of self that has altered our confidence in dealing with change and the problems it gives rise to [18]. More on our own, and self-absorbed than previous generations, with an exaggerated sense of threat, it has become normal for people to look for, and expect, professional support in dealing with what would once have been considered to be everyday difficulties. An all-regulating, blame-attaching response to problems and issues ensues that has, in its turn, helped shape a new, more limited, political framework and agenda for a period largely devoid of any broader social vision.

In part, this is because a more positive, social and cultural orientation towards change declined over the course of the twentieth century. Radicals who would once have promoted science and technology as a means for challenging vested authority and power, came to associate these with post-war American militarism [19]. Combined with the political defeat and exhaustion of the left, best symbolised internationally by the end of the Cold War, this helped foment a more conservative outlook.

In their turn, the old right, briefly triumphal about these developments, soon fell out with one another. The only force to have held them together was the threat posed to their interests by the Soviet bloc externally, and organised labour internally. The convergence of left and right reflects the absence of any broader sense of mission or agreed direction for society. The management of risk fulfills the need for a new organising principle. Politicians, concerned as to their legitimacy have then sought to repackage themselves as societal risk managers. They have also increasingly pursued the centre ground, seeking technical, rather than political, means to enhance turnout in elections.

But the demise of any polarised or principled political debate also fed declining interest and engagement in the public sphere. More limited aspirations – to promote voting by

anyone, for anyone, and to micro-manage the economy, focusing particularly upon privatised concerns such as education and health – have not inspired a new generation of voters. Attempts to include the public more in certain decision-making processes by various means have merely reflected and reinforced declining electoral participation rates [20].

What's more, whilst a nervous and atomised public is held to expect greater regulation of risk by the authorities in order to feel protected, there is no way of ever satiating this assumed demand. Rather, the failure to do so, appears to confirm a growing sense of human limitations and low expectations. It also feeds suspicion of the very authorities – political, corporate and scientific – that would need to be trusted in order to transcend contemporary difficulties, as well as further undermining social bonds. Increasingly, through these processes, people have learnt and been encouraged to assume the worst or presume a cover-up, even before any crisis has truly emerged.

Cultural Asymmetry

It is within this broader cultural context that we need to situate the events of September 11th 2001. Far from being the trigger to a period of insecurity and policy change, these events were a catalyst for wide-ranging trends that lay just beneath the surface of Western society. For the first time, 9/11 allowed Americans en masse to view and perceive of themselves as victims on the world stage. They hardly needed much encouragement. Victims – people who are known by what happens to them – as opposed to heroes – people who are known for what they do – are a key reference point of our times. The fact that the attacks were unprecedented in scale and occurred in the US simply allowed the domestic soul-searching to begin.

We should be clear that the real driver for this was the growing sense and exaggeration of risk, caused and accentuated by the individuation of society deriving from a concomitant loss of confidence and purpose. Notably, there has been a shift in conceptualisations of risk in recent years that parallels the demise of active participation in the political sphere. The classical notion of risk comprised an active formulation of 'taking a risk', that envisaged positive, as well as possibly negative, outcomes. Contemporary use however, focuses more on the notion of 'being at risk', a largely passive viewpoint that externalises threat as somehow being inherently and inevitably out there [21].

This historical shift however, retains an important cultural dimension. Accordingly, there are some who retain an understanding of risk-as-opportunity rather than becoming transfixed by risk-as-threat. It was this cultural asymmetry towards risk-taking, far more than the resource asymmetries other commentators have focused on, that was crucial in facilitating the events of 9/11. In another age, individuals armed with box-cutters might not have been able to achieve what they did. If we are to prevent similar incidents from happening again, we need to become conscious of quite how much we have changed as individuals and as a society over the short period since the end of the Cold War. These changes increasingly play a determining role in world affairs.

Some commentators have described this shift as the advent of what they call an 'age of anxiety', or 'culture of fear'. This culture stems from and further encourages a focus on the personal and private over the political and public. Indeed, political life increasingly focuses on personal issues as a consequence. This narrow, privatised introspection emphasises feelings over facts and image over insight, leading to the advent of what

has also been labeled the 'therapeutic society' [22]. Any sense of a collective good, or the need to maintain one's composure, has been replaced by an increasingly narrow and self-obsessed emotionalism that pours itself out because it fails to perceive any common good worth believing in – still less fighting for.

Accordingly, those who do believe in something – no matter what – appear as fanatics to contemporary sensibilities and are labeled 'fundamentalist'. Ironically, their sense of the possibility and need for social solidarity and sacrifice – irrespective of their limited aims – are important elements of resilience we would do well to learn from, rather than seek to eliminate. What's more, getting obsessed with – or seeking to moderate – the passions and aspirations of others, evades the urgent need to resurrect our own beliefs and capabilities.

Another measure of how much it is we who have changed, can be found by examining the literature on human responses in disasters going back over fifty years. In the past, it was generally assumed that people and systems were fairly resilient and could cope. With few exceptions this was found to be true [23]. Today, experts tend to assume that individuals and institutions can not manage without professional support in a crisis. Accordingly, it is now presumed that humanity and society are always vulnerable and in need of long-term, if not life-long assistance.

For nearly fifty years the Western allies stood face to face against an enemy known to have a formidable nuclear arsenal, stocks of, capabilities in, and a significant research programme into, chemical and biological weapons. Yet now, in an age when concepts of belief, truth and sacrifice have been so eroded that they no longer hold any purchase, and when confronted by those who are prepared to commit suicide for their cause, we move to reorganise the world as if we had never faced a greater threat. Surely this tells us more about ourselves than about the enemies we face?

Psychosocial Impacts

September the 11th 2001 is testimony to the remarkable strength and widespread prevalence of human resilience. As in most disasters, the orderly evacuation of the World Trade Centre reflected a tendency toward spontaneous, rational, and co-operative behaviour [24]. Yet, the political presumption of social vulnerability and concomitant need for professional support was not long in the offing. Indeed, the dust had hardly settled from the twin towers when a veritable army of counselors, psychologists and other assorted therapists descended on New York to offer their help.

Unsurprisingly, according to their own methods and determinations, these experts found an elevated incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – a term not even listed in psychiatric diagnostic manuals until the 1980s. They also assessed significant rates of depression across the entire population [25]. This was even among those who had only been 'exposed' to these events through the medium of television. In this regards, it is worth noting that the very act of searching for, and highlighting, this supposed evidence, itself derives from and ultimately reinforces a culture that effectively encourages people to label themselves as being ill.

As Tel-Aviv based psychiatrist, Professor Avi Bleich, has indicated, the reported incidence of trauma appears peculiarly elevated. This is especially so when contrasted to the significantly lower levels amongst an Israeli population who have suffered terrorist

attacks on an almost daily basis, over a protracted period [26]. All this reinforces the points made as to the determining role of cultural and historical factors in shaping our presumption of vulnerability. But the notion of frail individuals still prevails, shaping both policy and attitudes. Hence, even the Fire Department of New York – who's fire-fighters on September the 11th 2001 had been the heroes of the hour – subsequently reinvented themselves according to the dominant social outlook, as forgotten victims in need of support and compensation.

By the time the anthrax attacks occurred, Americans had become focused on security issues in general, and their own insecurity in particular. Hence, despite targeting politicians and the media, these incidents led to an unprecedented response right across society. This was manifest by the number of people who handled their mail, quite literally, with gloves, as well as in the demands for ciprofloxacin that inundated doctors across America, from those keen to have what was held to be necessary to treat themselves in the highly unlikely eventuality of being exposed. In the first two weeks of October 2001 alone, there were some 2,300 false anthrax alerts across the United States.

A number of these incidents led to cases of what is described in the psychiatric literature as mass psychogenic illness, or in more popular terms, people quite literally worrying themselves sick. One notable case occurred on the Maryland subway where 35 people had to be hospitalised after developing real symptoms including drowsiness, irritability, nausea and vomiting, subsequent to their concerns being alerted to the smell of a strange substance, which later turned out to be window cleaning fluid [27]. Many other similar incidents occured.

This was not that first time that mass psychogenic illness or something similar has been observed in populations. It is worth reminding ourselves that due to their fears, combined with a lack of knowledge as to how to use the equipment they had been provided with, a small number of Israelis suffocated themselves to death on their own gas masks during the first Gulf War. The figure was more than had died from being hit by one of Saddam Hussein's Scud missiles [28]. And, whilst they eventually habituated themselves to the new circumstances, this same population also suffered from an increased incidence of coronary problems in the early days of that conflict.

Whether based on a real threat or not, such responses can pose real strains upon society and its resources in an emergency. An incident in Goiana, in North-East Brazil, in 1987, where an inappropriately discarded hospital Cæsium source was stolen by youths is particularly apposite in this regards. Once the incident became known, it led to 100,000 people presenting themselves to the authorities for examination and treatment. Emergency workers had to commandeer a football pitch to sort out the worried-well from the truly exposed, who numbered in the end no more than 244, of which only 54 merited treatment.

The point is that people's concerns, genuine or otherwise, are shaped by the purposes and beliefs of their society and more particularly, those of their social and political leaders. This can have a real impact on the demand for resources and hence the ability of the authorities to cope with any particular incident. By the time an emergency actually occurs, it is too late to change such outlooks. Hence, whilst the numerous training exercises we now witness may serve some limited purpose for the authorities, they will have little impact upon social resilience itself.

Driving Concerns

The actions of political leaders and emergency responders at critical times, especially in the initial stages of any incident, send out important signals to the rest of society as to how they are expected to behave. This can drive public concerns rather than assuaging them. Ambulance personnel, for instance, are trained in an emergency, to calm trauma victims down irrespective of the state of their injuries by downplaying the latter, as such actions save lives. Contemporary culture however, is suspicious of expertise and demands a degree of openness and transparency that increasingly precludes the application of such professional judgment.

Few have questioned whether sending people in full chemical and biological weapons suits to handle the numerous incidents of white powder scares that occurred in the aftermath of the anthrax cases, was necessarily the most appropriate action to take. And, in a similar vein, questions could be asked as to the UK government's decision to place armed police outside mainline railway stations in London in the aftermath of September the 11th, or tanks and troops outside Heathrow airport subsequent to an alleged tip-off as to the possibility of a surface-to-air missile attack.

Some commentators have suggested that, far from reassuring the public, such steps are counter-productive and project an image of a society that appears to have lost control, or any sense of perspective and proportion. More recent episodes, concerning the systematic cancellation of flights to Washington DC from London and the release of information surrounding the supposed foiling of a plot to use the little-known chemical osmium tetroxide in an explosive device seem to confirm this trend.

This points to a growing confusion, or erosion of the divide, between what ought to remain private intelligence, and what is worth putting into the public domain, based upon an assessment of people's abilities to take effective action based on the information provided.

The British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, countenanced against taking action 'on the basis of a general warning', in a speech delivered on the 11th of November 2002 at the Banqueting House in London [29]. He indicated that this could lead to 'doing their [the terrorists'] job for them'. Yet, the authorities perceive themselves as being under a great deal of pressure to be seen to be acting. Whether their perceptions of the public mood are accurate, or the actions they take are truly effective, remains to be determined. Phrases such as 'alert, not alarmed', together with the assumption that a terrorist attack is a matter of 'when, not if', or indeed that an attack is 'inevitable', are about as general and unspecific as it gets.

Such rhetoric presumes itself to be challenging an assumed complacency towards the issue of terrorism, and is presented as, resolute and robust. But the generalised sense of 'being at risk' or 'vulnerable' that they project reveals an almost resigned air of fatalism towards future events. The use of language to prepare, or alert, the public, also smacks of blame-avoidance rather than determined resolve. It exaggerates the significance of terrorism to society and, in effect, encourages all-manner of potential terrorists, as well as hoaxers, loners and cranks to have a go. It also ignores the understanding the public do have, that determined individuals will always be able to get through, no matter how many technical barriers have been erected against them doing so.

Continuously issuing warnings or information that turn out to be factually incorrect, out of date, or too vague to act upon has a number of consequences.

First, it can literally make people ill. This need not be as dramatic in form as instances of mass psychogenic illness, but it has helped to foment a vaguer underlying anxiety about life and a gradual, passive disengagement from it, that could be tremendously disabling for those seeking to build up social resilience. This is reflected in the large number of surveys that – irrespective of their self-reported basis and the changing basis for assessment – point to increasing levels of stress, depression and trauma, in the aftermath of various incidents.

Second, the more likely scenario is that over a period of time, people grow used to ignoring such statements. Again, this could clearly have dramatic consequences. Recent polls suggest that on the whole people are going about their everyday lives ignoring the threat of terror in a pragmatic and resolute fashion. However, this insouciance is likely to be more representative of a growing, broader cynicism and mistrust of authority that now prevails throughout western societies, rather than reflecting any deeply felt inner commitment or resolve.

Third, constant warnings readily lead to a self-fulfilling demand for the authorities to do something – distracting them and us from real risks, and diverting social resources accordingly. Amongst other problems, this generates a situation best characterised as information overload. The demand for the public to be vigilant and report any unusual activity, combined with the task of existing and new agencies to sift through these vast amounts of potential intelligence material, clogs up the system, triggering paralysis by analysis, and failing to identify and act upon more plausible threats and risks. Banks, now required to report any 'suspicious' transaction to identify possible instances of money-laundering, report a similar trend towards not being able to see the wood for the trees.

Sadly, as no serious local authority can afford not to have revised its emergency plans and procedures in the light of these developments, it almost seems that if they do not assess themselves as potentially being on a terrorist hit-list then they can not be taking their responsibilities seriously. A climate has been created whereby whatever measures the government, security and emergency services take, there is an insatiable appetite for more and demands emerging from all quarters, both public and private, to the effect that not enough is being done. The problem is, that many of the measures being put in place are totemic gestures, rather than rational strategies.

It is also worth noting the significant element of commercial interests in such matters. Security is big business and indeed, due to our exaggerated sense of insecurity, one of the fastest growing sectors today. Accordingly, there are numerous risk and security consultants, as well as scientists and engineers, of varying abilities and distinctions, who have a financial interest in maintaining both social and individual concern in these matters. These have encouraged companies to develop so-called 'business continuity strategies' of dubious worth, focusing particularly on the integrity of their information systems, and the presumed cost of not doing so.

All this has led to an inevitable, if perverse, rise of a certain degree of wish-fulfillment. One senior executive recently remarked to me that the supply side for respirators or gas-masks was all ready and waiting, what he needed now was for the demand to be 'stimulated'.

What if?

As all issues are now examined through the prism of risk, there is a growing cultural proclivity to err on the side of caution. This emphasises the negative aspects of particular situations, assuming far-fetched scenarios and acting as if these were true. Extrapolating from worst case evidence, or even uncorroborated data, has become the norm. This has led to a distinctive shift over recent years from asking scientific 'What is?' type questions that call for specific evidence, to asking more speculative or anticipatory 'What if?' type questions. The latter appeals to a more general, emotionally-driven response.

But once we start focusing upon 'What if?', an inexorable logic develops. For instance, once we have asked the question 'What if there were groups or individuals out there who might want to use a biological agent against us?', then we are led through a convoluted series of further presumptions, 'What if they had access to such an agent?', 'What if they were willing, and capable, of deploying it?', and so on. Despite the absence of evidence, and the numerous cumulative assumptions, there is little choice, lest they be accused of complacency, but for the authorities to begin to prepare our capacity to cope with such an attack.

Thus it was, that smallpox, a disease recognised by the World Health Organisation as having been eradicated in the 1970s, has come back to the fore. Despite the two known repositories of the virus, in the United States and the former Soviet Union, having had no reported breaches of security it was possible to speculate otherwise. In fact, smallpox would not pose particularly great problems, but vaccines were demanded so that public health agencies could establish a protective ring around any incident, just in case.

But, the 'What if's?' did not stop there. After all, 'What if those dispersing the agent had made a point of doing so in a variety of places including airports to ensure effective worldwide dispersal?'. Then, clearly vaccine stocks needed to be sufficient to cover entire populations. In time, we would need to begin a process of actually inoculating first responders and then, in the interest of access and transparency, making the vaccine available to any other person who may wish to have it.

Unsurprisingly, what started as a speculative discourse and set of scenarios on one side of the Atlantic, spread like a real disease across to the other side. Other nations followed suit. The next logical step is to ask the same questions with respect to the many other viruses and micro-organisms that could be identified as posing equivalent or significant risks, such as ebola, tularemia, Lassa fever, Marburg fever, e-coli and botulinum, to name but a few.

Once the 'What if?' questions have started, it is quite literally like knocking over a line of dominoes, except that each step can cost millions, as well as inflicting a tremendous social cost on entire populations who effectively grow accustomed to living in fear. Interestingly, the fear of bioterrorism has tremendous purchase over contemporary society because it also acts as a powerful metaphor for élite concerns as to the corrosion of society from within [30]. Rather than analysing such issues at face value, or in their own terms, as a recent report by the Royal Society did in relation to chemical and biological agents [31], a broader historical and cultural perspective is required to understand why individuals and societies feel so vulnerable to what remain largely speculative scenarios.

Institutional Distractions

Speculation dominates the news after every high-profile arrest or incident. But rather than blaming the media for this, as many are prone to doing – thereby feeding a regulatory response – we would do well to examine the actions and statements of other key public institutions and individuals, ahead of such crises.

For instance, after the supposed discovery of the Category B agent ricin, in a flat in north London, the Financial Times reported an official as saying; 'There is a very serious threat out there still that chemicals that have not been found may be used by people who have not yet been identified' [32]. This statement of the obvious remains true whether there is a war on terror or not. But, under a banner headline stating; 'Chemical weapons factory discovered in a London flat', it helped set the tone of the debate. Yet, whilst the media are guilty of uncritical reporting, thereby enhancing social presumptions, we should be clear that they alone do not set the tone. This latter rather reflects élite fears and the broader cultural perspective that inclines towards believing the worst.

Ironically, as more discretely reported in the Sunday Times at a later date, this particular story transpired to be largely false [33]. Analyses by scientists from the UK government's chemical weapons establishment at Porton Down, found no evidence of ricin manufacture. Yet this aspect of the story was never officially reported or retracted by the authorities and so the assumption amongst the public that it was true, has remained. Presumably, it was felt to be a useful vehicle for keeping the public vigilant.

The media both reflect our cautionary climate and, in certain instances, help to amplify it. But it is nervous politicians and officials who are the real drivers as – lacking any vision of their own – they are unable to separate themselves effectively from the broader culture. In the UK for instance, the newly-established Health Protection Agency has issued numerous public health advisories through its 'cascade system', to facilitate GPs in the presumed, anticipated task of having to identify the first signs of a chemical or biological attack.

This focus not only diverts resources from where they could best be used within the health service, it effectively helps to establish the context and content for future discussion. Worse, the failure to use specific expertise and to assess the real threat posed appropriately, distracts us from the real risks we continue to face, both from terrorism and from other everyday life. As has continuously been demonstrated, real terrorists prefer to use more reliable weapons such as high-explosives and car bombs.

Leading scientists continue to identify nature as by far a greater threat to humanity than presumed acts of biological terrorism – although this danger too is prone to being exaggerated. There is little recognition given to the fact that advanced economies are better placed to deal with the consequences and contain the potential of such incidents. Rather, contemporary obsessions prevail, as can be seen by examining new funding priorities and programmes, which dictate an unwarranted distortion of social resources and research priorities towards so-called 'weapons of mass destruction'.

Psychiatry Lessons

Overall, governments have sought to assuage public concerns through the provision of what they consider to be appropriate and accurate information. Ironically, this approach,

advocated by the new gurus of risk management and communication may serve to make matters worse by feeding the insatiable appetite for fear. It is widely contradicted by a wealth of literature emerging from the field of psychiatry that suggests the provision of information alone – outside an understanding of context and the sense of one's ability to shape this – can be a potentially futile and counterproductive exercise.

It is not so straightforward to reassure anxious people. Even when concerns are correctly identified and targeted, the evidence suggests that – whilst the more extreme manifestation of symptoms may abate temporarily – without tackling the deeper underlying concepts behind them, problems can soon reemerge, manifesting themselves in an exaggerated form [34].

The bottom line is the need to challenge people's core beliefs about a situation head on. But increasingly over recent years, we have become unwilling to do so. As a society we prioritise consensus-seeking over confrontation. The latter appears too dismissive, or judgmental, to contemporary sensitivities. What's more, this is not a task that can be achieved by individual psychiatrists or therapists, even in the rare instances where these are not affected by the prevailing norms and values. If the surrounding culture continues to provide signals and messages reinforcing concerns, then the expert is likely to be ignored or questioned anyway.

The best that can be achieved in such circumstances is to habituate people to the world they now live in, by encouraging an acceptance of uncertainty. But doing so serves to confirm the dominant social script establishing concern about terrorism. The real task would be to remind people that there is far more to life than terrorism. This has not been addressed by the authorities so far. It requires a focus on ends well beyond dealing with immediate problems. This is a political task that far from distracting us from contemporary issues, should inform the very solutions we seek to put in place.

By taking a broader, longer-term view, we would become more conscious of the extent to which trauma itself is a social and historical construct. The widely used terminology of post-traumatic stress disorder did not emerge into professional circles until the mid-1980s. At the time, this was to explain the particular problems faced by certain Vietnam veterans in the US.

These suffered not so much from their defeat in South-East Asia, as from rejection by their own communities upon their return home. Shunned as pariahs and labeled psychopaths, the PTSD category eventually offered moral exculpation and access to compensation. But whereas older conditions such as 'shell shock' and 'battle fatigue' had been held to be specific, relating to a soldier's background and psyche, the new diagnosis was applied more generally – assumed to derive from the fundamentally traumatising experience of war.

Originally framed as applying only to extreme events, PTSD spread rapidly like a disease, to encompass relatively common happenings such as accidents, muggings, verbal or sexual harassment, and even workplace disputes. It finally entered the official Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980 and aid agencies now commonly assume whole populations to suffer from it in advance of detailed analysis.

Ironically, most veterans diagnosed with PTSD have had no combat experience, pointing to a self-justifying reconstruction of current problems through a narrative of past trauma. Research also suggests that PTSD is more serious and more common among international relief and development personnel, than for the locals they seek to support [35]. These facts indicate the category to be culturally constructed and its causes

amplified through our particular Western obsession with risk and stress, often in pursuit of remediation or recognition.

Studies of those exposed to a range of natural and manmade disasters consistently show that beliefs held prior to an event coupled with one's understanding of it, account for variation in symptoms far better than the particular characteristics or severity of the experiences encountered.

Accordingly, we should also be wary, as indicated earlier, of the figures regularly cited for incidence of trauma amongst the US population post-9/11. These point to the extent to which, even apparently objective data, such as that measuring people's anxieties in the aftermath of terrorist incidents, is itself a cultural construct based upon assumptions of human vulnerability and their ability to cope. As Furedi has noted, in the past, the dominant social script or narrative would have been one more focused on social and individual resilience and initiative.

Technical Fixations

Despite all the evidence pointing to the urgent need for greater clarity of purpose and direction, most activity since 11 September 2001 has focused narrowly upon the technical means to combat terror. The standard fare of conferences and papers revolves around the assumed need for better intelligence, more surveillance, new detection equipment, protective clothing, and computer models to predict behaviour. When the public is engaged it is at the more basic level of identifying means for effectively communicating predetermined messages and information, or to exhort the need for further vigilance under the banal and general slogan of 'alert, not alarmed'.

It is also the case that whatever the government does in these regards there is an insatiable appetite for more. This comes from the posturing of opposition politicians, and the practical demands of emergency responders, as well as the commercial interests of security providers and consultants, who all appeal to the public's understandable concerns. Some propose the creation of a US-style department of homeland security. Others too, inured by years of cynicism and mistrust in authority are now inclined to assume the worst and presume a cover-up.

The urgent need to engage in a broader debate as to social aims and direction, based upon clearly principled beliefs and the desire to engender amongst the population a sense of purpose that would truly make it resilient to acts of terror is continuously put off for some other time, or not even considered. Yet, it is this sense of mission in the world that, having broken down at home, leaves us incredibly unarmed in the face of the limited threat posed by the likes of al Qa'ida and, failing that, what increasingly become labeled as their 'sympathisers'.

If the war on terror was ever hoped to help society rediscover a sense of unity and purpose, then what we are actually witnessing could not be any further from such goals. Far from bringing people together, it has proven deeply divisive and revealed the deep cracks that currently run through society and its institutions. What's more, technical barriers or solutions to the problem of terror only make things worse as they encourage people to become ever more suspicious and mistrustful as to the activity of their neighbours – rather than bringing people together as the times require.

Resilience is not a technology that can be bought. Rather it is an attitude reflecting wider patterns of social development and outlook. Accordingly, attempts to develop

technical solutions to the problem of terrorism simply end up reflecting and reinforcing existing values. Focusing on the means and losing sight of the ends only builds lack of direction into the system. Presumably, those who are willing to risk their lives fighting fires or combating other emergencies, do so not so that their children can go on to do the same, but for some broader purpose. It is this that we seem to have lost sight of.

Real Resilience

The concept of 'resilience' – the ability to withstand or recover from adverse conditions – has come of age subsequent to the terrorist attacks of the 11th of September 2001. Politicians, emergency planners and other officials, now talk of the need to 'build', 'engender', 'improve' or 'enhance' resilience in society. Unfortunately, by framing the discussion in the fashionable language of 'risk', an element of passivity and inevitability has been built into the solutions proffered.

The UK Cabinet Office describes the aim of 'building resilience' in terms of reducing susceptibility to challenges 'by reducing the probability of their occurrence and their likely effects' [36]. The notion that it may be possible to shape conditions, outlooks and perceptions in advance, by setting a clearer political agenda, is not particularly considered. Hence, despite inherent elements of resilience, society continuously seems to down-play such factors, becoming fixated on more immediate problems and undermined by self-doubt.

In reality of course, people and systems continue to display a remarkable degree of resilience given the chance [37]. Those directly affected by the events of 9/11 have had little choice but to get on with their lives and, with few exceptions that is what they have done. It is also the case that the total financial cost of these events, both structural and in terms of compensation amounted to less than 1% of US gross domestic product in any one year. To put this into perspective it is worth noting that the Enron saga that followed cost a great deal more.

Building on such spontaneous responses, rather than undermining them, requires promoting a clearer sense of who we are and what we are for. This would necessitate truly engaging the public in a political debate as to aims and values. It would also force a need to be more judgmental of others than contemporary society allows. And in turn, this would emphasise the need for collective purpose over individual security in order to achieve predetermined social goals. Sadly, a focus on knowing, engaging, judging and acting is not so straightforward today.

Despite this being the real role and responsibility of those in positions of authority, there is good reason to anticipate their reluctance to do so. For if we were to characterise resilient people as their having a greater sense of who they are and of what they can achieve together, along with a willingness to judge others and take action accordingly – it is quite possible to question whether the authorities in the UK, the US, or anywhere else nowadays, would view such a project with any degree of optimism. Resilient people are not necessarily easy to manage. They demand more from those in authority than maybe these latter are willing, or able, to provide.

Accordingly, it is likely, for the foreseeable future at least, that there will be much talk about the need to engender social resilience, but very little by way of effective action. It is far easier to make glib references to the need to defend 'our way of life', 'our values',

or even 'freedom and democracy', than it is to provide real content to such concepts through a concerted campaign to re-engage the public in political discourse. Indeed, few of the authorities concerned with civil defence or homeland security consider it their responsibility to lead on such an agenda.

There is, of course, a reason as to why these matters are not being addressed. That is, that there is a failure to recognise that the problem has anything to do with the domestic situation at all. Terrorism is usually perceived as being a problem relating to others, out there. The notion that an absence of direction at home may somehow drive our perception of terrorist acts, as well as undermining resilience and encouraging the perpetrators themselves is a novel one for those in authority.

Indeed, there is an even more direct relation between us and the terrorists. That is that terrorism often reflects the dominant forms of social understanding and values it emerges within. When society asserted the need to recognise the independent sovereignty of nation state, terrorists fought politically-motivated national liberation struggles. Now, on the other hand, we live in an age when political debate – beyond the confines of the personal – is weak, or non-existent. One consequence of this is the advent of terrorists without stated aims or goals. What's more, this nihilistic lashing out against modernity is unrestrained by any sense of moral purpose and draws encouragement from the broader self-loathing evident in western culture.

Giving it a name, such as al Qa'ida, rather misses the point. Its perpetrators are as likely to be found at home as anywhere else. They include Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma bomber, the Aum Shinrikyo cult, who planted the chemical agent sarin, on the Tokyo subway in 1995, and even the 9/11 hijackers themselves who, far from being poor kids from the Gaza strip were relatively wealthy and well-educated. They had all spent some considerable time attending Western universities and, ultimately reflected our own dominant norms and values.

This points to a final problem relating to the war on terror – that is that even if Osama bin Laden and all his acolytes were captured or killed tomorrow, still the problem of terror would not have gone away. This is because a key driver to our perception and response to these events has been our own insecurities. And these are not about to go away. What's more, by advertising how vulnerable we feel and how frail we have become in relation to any activity, at any time, in any location, we have effectively educated a new generation of the future disaffected, whether terrorists, animal-rights activists, hoaxers, loners or cranks, as to how easy it is to undermine our society using little more than plastic knives and bags of sugar.

The sorry truth that lies at the heart of the war on terror is that the West is at war with itself. The acts of 11 September 2001, having been perpetrated by outsiders, served as a useful distraction from addressing where the problems really lie. In fact, those individuals proved so effective because in many ways they reflect our own nihilist culture. It is just that, consciously or not, they have captured this better than we do ourselves.

Conclusions

From the preceding discussion a number of tentative conclusions can be drawn;

1. A focus on our own societies, psychology and culture is a missing element necessary for understanding both our response to recent acts of terrorism and, the particular salience we attribute to them.

2. More research is required to explore the largely Western origins of anti-human, anti-modern and anti-Western ideas, as well as how these then become adopted by others.
3. The erosion of social bonds in our society has left a weak, self-centred form of individualism that may be less capable of withstanding difficulties or of perceiving of a greater common good or purpose.
4. A proper understanding of risk perception has to take into account the determining influence of social factors, such as political disengagement and stasis, as well as being grounded in scientific evidence.
5. The key asymmetry used by terrorists is that of our respective attitudes toward risk-taking. We must reassert the inevitability of risk in all activity and highlight the fact that without taking risks nothing can be gained.
6. Government should neither make fatalistic statements about terrorism, nor offer the promise to protect us from all risks. Above-all there should remain a clear distinction between private intelligence and public information.
7. The public are the primary targets of terrorism and accordingly, the real first responders. Their attitudes and values in advance of such incidents are key to shaping outcomes.
8. People and systems are already resilient. Contrary to popular perception, in an emergency, the public rarely panics – displaying both rational and pro-social behaviour – and vital processes continue to function.
9. Real resilience is an attitude, or mindset. It derives from the quiet confidence of having a broader common purpose, combined with a willingness to judge others and to act when necessary.
10. Building real resilience requires re-engaging the public in an active sense, building from their spontaneous co-operative responses, rather than by-passing these using technical means.
11. Technical solutions, when used as an end in themselves – as opposed to a means to a broader end – can push people apart, promoting mistrust and suspicion and thereby further corroding social bonds.
12. Counter-terrorism strategies and national resilience need to be guided by, and embedded within, a broader framework of aims and values for the whole of society.
13. There is an urgent need to restore the centrality of a principled and positive political agenda for society that opposes the use of fear as a vehicle for winning arguments or building coalitions.
14. Social leaders need to focus society on a broader vision, beyond the immediacy of terrorism. It is only through this that they may hope to secure real loyalty and active engagement in achieving their purposes.

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