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Fear and Terror in a Post-Political Age

THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

Man is not destroyed by suffering; he is destroyed by suffering without meaning.[1]

ON 11 MAY 2006 THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT PUBLISHED THE REPORT OF the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005.[2] This document examined what was known of the terrible events that had occurred the previous summer and which had led to the loss of 52 innocent lives, in addition to those of the four perpetrators. The preface to the report describes it as a 'narrative' and that is an apt and telling description for what follows. The document presents a step-by-step account of 'what' happened, 'where' and 'when' it happened, 'who' carried it out and even 'how', but – despite investigations lasting almost a year and a section devoted to the issue – little explanation as to 'why'.

Yet it is precisely the 'why' that is of interest. Without understanding why, there is little hope of precluding such incidents from happening again in the future. In addition, not being clear as to 'why' allows all manner of self-appointed experts, pundits and commentators – according to their pre-existing political persuasions – to project their own pet theory onto the situation with a view to shaping ensuing policy. Most common among these purported explanations has been the presumption that the attacks formed some kind of retribution for the British government's having supported the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.[3] But oddly, the assumed ringleader, Mohammad

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[1] Phrase attributed to and forming the essence of V. E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1959.

[2] Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7 July 2005, Norwich, HMSO, 2006, HC 1087.

[3] Such a view has become mainstream across the political spectrum, migrating from George Galloway's tirade against Tony Blair upon being elected MP for the Respect Party in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets in 2005, to the authors of

Sidique Khan, made no specific mention of Iraq in his so-called 'martyrdom video' released soon after the bombings. Others suggest that the bombers were part of a resurgent and radical global Islamist movement or extremist conspiracy. Accordingly, the presumed influences of madrasas, mosques and mullahs have come under scrutiny. Alternative explanations and justifications have been sought in the supposed social and economic backgrounds of the conspirators,[4] as well as their psychological profiles and educational performances.

Much has been made of the fact that two of the four had travelled to Pakistan, but the report indicates that who they may have met there 'has not yet been established'. In fact, the Official Account describes the backgrounds of the perpetrators of the London bombings as 'unexceptional', their purported links to al-Qaeda as lacking 'firm evidence', and their methods and materials as respectively requiring 'no great expertise' and being 'readily available'. We should not take the assertions of the bombers to have acted on behalf of other Muslims at face value. A parallel Report into the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005, issued by the Intelligence and Security Committee, also notes that the claimed responsibility for the attacks by Ayman al-Zawaheri was, 'not supported by any firm evidence'.[5]

By interpreting the available information according to their own preferred models, many analysts have, in effect, been doing the terrorists' thinking and talking for them. They have helped to shape the vacuum of information and confusion otherwise left behind. These purported explanations may, in their turn, encourage and even serve as justifications to others intent on action, but are they right?

We will never know exactly what motivated the London bombers. Those truly responsible are no longer around to inform us. The publication of a somewhat limited 'narrative', rather than of an in-depth political analysis, shows how difficult it has been for the authorities to establish the motives and drivers of those concerned. It suggests that much of the superficial speculation is not supported by any hard evidence. There is little to indicate that Khan, or his collaborators Shehzad Tanweer, Jermaine Lindsay and Hasib Hussain

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'Riding Pillion for Tackling Terrorism is a High-Risk Policy', *Security, Terrorism and the UK*, ISP/NSC Briefing Paper 05/01, London, RIIA, 2005.

[4] R. Briggs, C. Fieschi and H. Lownsbrough, *Bringing it Home: Community-Based Approaches to Counter-Terrorism*, London, Demos, 2006.

[5] Report into the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005, Norwich, HMSO, 2006, Cm 6785.

were particularly pious or held any deep appreciation of the Koran, still less that they had direct relations to anyone in Palestine, Bosnia or Iraq. They did not bother to ask their families, friends or neighbours what they thought about such matters. That is why these people were truly shocked by their actions.

The bombers met in the local gymnasium rather than the local mosque, they went on outdoor activities together and, the day before the attacks, one of them played that quintessential English game – cricket – in his local park. In the end, they acted alone – in isolation – a form of private gesture against a world they appeared to feel little connection to, let alone ability to influence. They took part in the ultimate 'not in my name' protest – a trend and slogan manifested by many other interest groups nowadays.[6]

The real truth, then, about the London bombings may be that they were largely pointless and meaningless. This would suggest a problem entirely opposed to that presented by politicians and officials, media and other commentators alike. The bombers were fantasists – want-to-be terrorists – searching for an identity and a meaning to their lives. They hoped to find it in a global cause that was not their own, but that appeared to give expression to their nihilistic sense of grievance. Islam was their motif, not their motive.

This interpretation may offer little solace to the relatives of those affected. Their demands, as well as those of others, for a public inquiry into the matter appear more like a desperate attempt to find a more substantial explanation or to attribute blame where, for now at least, none can be found.[7] That is hardly surprising as the desire to understand the causes of, or to attach some kind of meaning to, adversity is a strong one. It can be deflating or confusing to discover that some event did not have the profundity originally attached to it, or that it was largely pointless. Nevertheless, we could all learn from the mother of Theo van Gogh, the Dutch filmmaker murdered by a similar, self-styled radical Islamist, who indicated in relation to her plight; 'What is so regrettable . . . is that Theo has been murdered by such a loser, such an incoherent person. Murder or manslaughter is

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[6] 'Not in my name' was the slogan used by many of those opposed to the Iraq War of 2003. Faisal Devji points to a growing usage of such non-political statements by a wide variety of groups encompassing environmental protestors and others in *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity*, New Delhi, Foundation Books, 2005.

[7] This is not to belittle the genuine grief of all those concerned, or indeed their understandable desire for support.

always a terrible thing but to be killed by such a figure makes it especially hard.'[8]

Recognizing the random and unpredictable character of her loss ensures it is not endowed with portentous meaning. It does not lead to a demand to reorganize society around the presumption of similar events taking place To do so would be to normalize extremes and thereby to marginalize what is normal. This would effectively 'do the terrorists' job for them',[9] by institutionalizing instability. The usual rejoinder to this is to argue that terrorists 'only need to be lucky once',[10] whilst governments and their security agencies must counter them at all times if they are not to lose the public's support. But the evidence from 7 July 2005 rather suggests that this perception is not true. Most people sought to go to work the following day.

As the quotation at the beginning of this article from the Holo-caust survivor and philosopher, Viktor Frankl suggests, an absence of meaning is not just disorienting, it can be debilitating. Indeed, it is our failure to place things into an agreed framework that can readily make random events assume catastrophic proportions, thereby inducing a sense of fear and terror. The French political scientist, Zaki Laïdi, has suggested that the dissolution of the old – Cold War – world order, was what in particular helped to create what he has coined to be a 'world without meaning'.[11] Accordingly, there is now a desperate and obsessive search for meaning and identity in society, even in situations that can be quite meaningless. 'What is it that can turn a young man from Leeds into a suicide bomber?' we ask our-selves. But this question, clear and logical as it seems initially, is itself a product of the times we live in. At the height of the Second World War nobody asked what turned young men from Berlin into aerial bombers.

Within an assumed framework of meaning, or in pursuit of agreed goals, such events are understood and can be withstood – as was the case during the IRA's terror campaign on mainland Britain. Today,

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[8] Cited in *De Telegraaf*, 26 July 2005, available at; http://www.telegraaf.nl/binnenland/23285701/Moeder_Van_Gogh:_enige_juiste_straf.html.

[9] A common warning from the prime minister, the head of the Security Service and many others.

[10] A phrase attributed to the IRA after failing to assassinate the then prime minis-ter, Margaret Thatcher.

[11] Z. Laïdi, *A World Without Meaning*, London, Taylor & Francis, 1998.

in an age when nothing is – or appears to be – so obvious any more, everything is up for grabs.

THE PROCESS OF RADICALIZATION

To some, what is happening was predictable. The idea of a 'clash of civilizations', taken from the title of Samuel Huntington's book,[12] assumed that future conflicts would increasingly pit East against West in a fundamental conflict over values. This thesis benefited from a renewed degree of interest in the aftermath of the attacks upon America in September 2001, but few have critically enquired into the true ideological origins of those perpetrating acts of terrorism in the name of Islam.

Others have been more circumspect in their pronouncements, but in essence the core assumption remains. In a speech on security to the Foreign Policy Centre in London,[13] British Prime Minister Tony Blair argued in reference to the on-going war on terror, that 'This is not a clash between civilisations. It is a clash about civilisation. It is the age-old battle between progress and reaction, between those who embrace and see opportunity in the modern world and those who reject its existence; between optimism and hope on the one hand; and pessimism and fear on the other'. But the ideas and protagonists that Tony Blair had in mind in this 'clash about civilization' are all foreign in their origins or, at least, externally oriented and focused. He continued 'The roots of global terrorism and extremism are indeed deep. They reach right down through decades of alienation, victimhood and political oppression in the Arab and Muslim world'. In a similar vein, the recently released British government document, Countering International Terrorism: The United Kingdom's Strategy,[14] identifies the need for a 'battle of ideas, challenging the ideological motivations that extremists believe justify the use of violence'. This key strand of the strategy is described in terms indicating that it

[12] S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996.

[13] T. Blair, 'Not a Clash Between Civilisations, but a Clash About Civilisation', speech, London, Foreign Policy Centre, 21 March 2006, available at http://fpc.org.uk/events/past/231.

[14] Countering International Terrorism: The United Kingdom's Strategy, Norwich, HMSO, 2006, Cm 6888.

has been solely conceptualized as affecting, or targeting, Muslims or Muslim communities.

So while most politicians and officials have slowly reconciled themselves to the fact that many of the perpetrators of contemporary acts of terror are Western born or educated, the glib assumption remains that what drives them is a foreign ideology or agenda, that only Muslims can understand or address – a point reasserted by the prime minister in subsequent comments to the House of Commons Liaison Committee,[15] and again more recently by the home secretary, John Reid.[16] But is the problem really a 'clash about civilization' or, even as the home secretary proposed, that we are having to manage the consequences of some kind of conflict within Islam? In some ways it seems that we face a more profound cultural crisis domestically, but to recognize the problem as such is discomforting for Western leaders and societies. It would require understanding the extent to which many of the ideas that inspire the nihilist terrorism we witness today are largely home grown and inculcated. Whilst conceding that many of the perpetrators and conspirators are increasingly turning out to have been Western in their origins, many people, including Tony Blair, still presume the perpetrators' guiding influences to have been reactionary ideas and ideologies from the East. Hence, a lazy empirical approach has been employed to identify the so-called 'risk factors' that may lead individuals to becoming 'radicalized'.[17] This approach assumes a conclusion and then goes in search of the evidence to corroborate it; it is profoundly unscientific. Above all, it ignores the dominant social context within which most such individuals find themselves – that is, advanced Western societies.

Unsurprisingly, many researchers find their prejudices confirmed by using this method, that is what is wrong with it. Accordingly, listening to the inflammatory rhetoric of an obscure cleric or emanating from an impoverished background appears to be reasserted as 'radicalizing' influences in the minds of the researchers. All agree that a deep sense of injustice for affairs in the Middle East

[15] T. Blair, uncorrected transcript of oral evidence to the House of Commons Liaison Committee, 4 July 2006, available at http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmselect/cmliaisn/uc709-iii/uc70902.htm.

[16] J. Reid, speech to Muslim groups in East London, 20 September 2006, available at http://press.homeoffice.gov.uk/Speeches/sp-muslim-group-20-09-06.

[17] There is a burgeoning literature on the causes of so-called radicalization emerging from a wide variety of organizations, very little of which is peer reviewed.

is also a key influence.[18] But one could equally propose that being a billionaire, driving a white Mercedes or running the family business are significant risk factors. Certainly all three have featured in Osama bin Laden's life. Starting with an answer and then joining up the dots is child's play. It offers no insight beyond assumed conclusions.

The trial in London of the so-called 'Crawley Group', accused of plotting further terrorist atrocities through having acquired a large quantity of ammonium nitrate fertilizer is quite apposite in this regards. Their list of supposed targets included shoppers, drinkers, football fans and, allegedly, 'slags' in nightclubs.[19] Such ideas appear to reflect more those of contemporary policy makers and their exaggerated fears of social disorder in certain sectors of society rather than verses from the Koran. So, could paying too much attention to government policy be a radicalizing factor too? As Marc Sageman has pointed out in the most authoritative study of people associated with al-Qaeda,[20] there are no clear radicalizing influences or predisposing risk factors that can be identified. If anything, these individuals are likely to have a middle- or upper-class secular background and to be reasonably well educated. That would put many of the critics and commentators at risk of becoming radicalized too.

In particular though, the individuals concerned were rarely recruited from above but rather they seem actively to have sought out terrorist networks or sects that they might join. Some only converted to Islam after this. This would seem to confirm their desire to be part of something, but more importantly it raises the issue as to why they are unable to find that something closer to home. The key is not what it is that attracts a minority from a variety of backgrounds, including some who are relatively privileged, to fringe Islamist organizations, but rather what it is about our own societies and culture that they fail to provide aspirational, educated and energetic young individuals with a clear sense of purpose and collective direction through which to lead their lives and realize their ambitions, that they are left

[18] 'Towards a Community-Based approach to Counter-Terrorism', report on Wilton Park conference, 20–2 March 2006, WPSO6/5, available at http://www. wiltonpark.org.uk/documents/conferences/WPS06-5/pdfs/WPS06-5.pdf.

[19] 'Gang "Planned to Bomb London Nightclub" ', *Guardian*, 25 May 2006.

[20] M. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

looking for this elsewhere, including, for some, among various arcane belief systems.

In some ways the nihilist criminals that detonated their rudimentary devices in London in the summer of 2005 appear to reflect the sentiments of other disgruntled individuals and groups across the developed world today. Their acts seem more akin to the Columbine high-school massacre and other such incidents, where usually respectable young men, born and educated in the West, decide for various reasons – or none that we can work out – to kill themselves and scores of civilians. Their ideas and influences appear to have far less to do with imams and mullahs, and far more in common with the dystopian views of numerous commentators who criticize Western society today. Indeed, a recently published compilation of Osama bin Laden's writings reveals how frequently he is inclined to cite Western writers, Western diplomats and Western thinkers.[21] At one point he even advises the White House to read Robert Fisk, rather than, as one might have supposed, the Koran.

It would be remiss to ignore the growing influence of a significant degree of what some have identified as a culture of self-loathing in the developed world. If one wants to discover anti-American views coherently expressed, or people who reject the benefits of science, progress and modernity, then one need not look far to find them. Such opinions are all around us. Indeed, less than two days had passed after 9/11 when Seumas Milne first used the term anti-American in a *Guardian* newspaper article entitled 'They Can't See Why They are Hated'.[22] On the same day, the Reverend Jerry Falwell, pastor of the 22,000-member Thomas Road Baptist Church of Lynchburg, Virginia, told US television viewers that God had given America 'what we deserve'.[23] Aside from such extremes, many others point to continued American intransigence over issues such as global warming and human rights as purported explanations for what happened.

It may be unpalatable or unpleasant to recall or recognize that a significant number of people, not all of whom were Muslim , were not that saddened to see the Twin Towers in New York going down. A

[21] Osama bin Laden, *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, ed. by B. Lawrence, trans. by J. Howarth, London, Verso, 2005.

[22] S. Milne, 'They Can't See Why They are Hated', *Guardian*, 13 September 2001.

[23] Cited in 'God Gave U.S. "What We Deserve" Falwell Says', *Washington Post*, 14 September 2001.

sense that America had it coming to it was quite widespread in some supposedly respectable quarters, where a barely concealed *schadenfreude* was in evidence. Does this go some way towards explaining why it is that one of those arrested in the summer of 2006 after an alleged plot to use liquid explosives on airlines flying from London's Heathrow airport has turned out to be the son of a UK Conservative Party agent?

American consumerism is now widely viewed with contempt, but this reflects a broader view of human action in the world. Increasingly, Western intellectuals have come to portray this as being largely negative.[24] In certain quarters ambition has become portrayed as arrogant, development as dangerous and success as selfish. Even in America itself power has become presented as egotism, freedom as illusory and the desire to defend oneself as the act of a bully. Western society today is replete with individuals and institutions that appear determined to criticize and undermine human achievements. The president of Britain's Royal Society called one of his latest books *Our Final Century: Will the Human Race Survive the Twenty-First Century?*,[25] while the professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics is comfortable describing human beings as being little more than a plague upon the planet in his book entitled *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*.[26] A recent edition of the prestigious UK science journal *New Scientist* speculated positively as to what the earth would be like without humans (and presumably without the *New Scientist*) being there.[27] Nor are such ideas limited to those of a few academics. Surely, when Michael Moore's *Stupid White Men* became the best-selling book on both sides of the Atlantic – selling over 300,000 copies in the UK in its first year of publication alone – a few bright minds in the security world and beyond should have noticed the growing depth of cynicism and disillusionment in society and the potentially adverse consequences.[28]

[24] M. Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity: A Defense of the Human Spirit against Anti-Humanism, Misanthropy, Mysticism and Primitivism*, London, Cassell, 1995.

[25] M. Rees, *Our Final Century: Will the Human Race Survive the Twenty-First Century?*, London, William Heinemann, 2003.

[26] J. Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*, London, Granta, 2003.

[27] 'Earth Without People: What if we All Disappeared Tomorrow?', *New Scientist*, 14 October 2006.

[28] M. Moore, *Stupid White Men . . . and Other Sorry Excuses for the State of the Nation!*, London, Penguin, 2002.

It is this cultural malaise and pessimistic outlook that forms the backdrop, and inevitably shapes, contemporary terrorism. Increasingly, it appears that this is sustained by two elements – the radical nihilists who are prepared to lose their lives and those of others around them in their misguided determination to leave their mark upon a world that they reject, and the nihilist intellectuals who help frame a public discourse and culture of apocalyptic failure and rejection. Yet, the authorities appear determined to identify the causes as emanating elsewhere.

THE EROSION OF SOCIETY

As the UK in particular has had to confront the problems of conflict and terror before, it is readily assumed by many that all that is required now is to re-ignite a bit of the 'Blitz spirit' to overcome today's enemies. Not only does this approach miss the internal drivers of the problem, it fails to identify the extent to which British society, as well as others in the developed world, has been transformed in less than a generation. One of the best indicators of this is through our use of language. The sociologist Frank Furedi points to how certain words have exploded into popular consciousness in recent years, reflecting fundamental changes in society. For instance, references to the phrase 'at risk' in British broadsheet newspapers increased ten-fold over the course of the 1990s.[29] Presumably this is not because we actually face ten times as many risks as previously. Rather, it reflects developments in our perception of the world. Furedi notes that even the way in which we use the word risk has been altered. In the past it was often used in an active sense as in 'taking a risk'. This suggested possible benefits, as much as inherent problems, and indicated an engaged relationship between individuals and society. Today, more often than not, the word is used passively, as in 'being at risk', thereby also pointing to a more disconnected orientation towards change.

This shift towards a passive and more individualized perspective on society is equally well brought out through the emergence of a

[29] F. Furedi, *Culture of Fear: Risk-Taking and the Morality of Low Expectations*, London, Continuum, 2002.

growing therapeutic discourse. Words such as 'stress', 'trauma' and 'vulnerable' have also recently emerged into popular consciousness, undergoing a similar ten-fold increase in use over a ten-year period.[30] At the same time, more active or social concepts such as 'character' or 'trade union' seem to have changed their meaning. The former now often refers to a personality in some kind of television soap-opera, while the latter, which used to conjure up thoughts of some sort of social solidarity with members of a community one might not even know, is today more likely to represent a mechanism to obtain individual perks or safeguard personal security. When Margaret Thatcher famously suggested in an interview that 'there is no such thing as society', she was widely derided.[31] Today, it would appear that her statement was almost prescient. The erosion of core social bonds and forms of engagement over the last couple of decades has been striking. Among other outcomes, this process has diminished the awareness of the extent to which many phenomena are shaped and determined by social forces.

The combination of a breaking down of social affiliations, at both the formal and the informal levels of participation, and a resultant isolation of individuals in society, together with the absence of a sense of collective purpose in the aftermath of the Cold War, has left people prone to developing an exaggerated sense of risk and vulnerability in relation to numerous issues. At the formal level, people in advanced Western societies are increasingly unlikely to participate in the political process. This effect is most striking among younger age groups.[32] Electoral turnouts in many countries are at an all-time low and in the few instances where these are high, emotional attachment often appears to rule over reasoned argument. Few today are active, or even passive, members of political parties or trade unions as their forebears were,[33] and there is little evident desire in some quarters to engage in – or raise the standard of – debate. When people do vote, it is often out of a sense of duty, or on a negative basis – against a

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[30] F. Furedi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age*, London, Routledge, 2004.

[31] M. Thatcher, 'Aids, Education and the Year 2000', *Woman's Own*, 23 September 1987.

[32] A. Rosenthal, *The Decline of Representative Democracy: Process, Participation, and Power in State Legislatures*, Washington, DC, Congressional Quarterly Books, 1997.

[33] P. F. Whiteley and P. Seyd, *High-Intensity Participation: The Dynamics of Party Activism in Britian*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2002.

candidate, rather than for the alternative. The figures for those aged under 30 are even worse. This means that there is little loyalty, and accordingly predictability in the outcome of many contemporary elections. Marginal events, largely disconnected from the actual process – such as a terrorist attack, environmental disaster, or claims as to the personal character traits of particular contestants – can have a disproportionate impact. Turnouts range between 10 per cent in local elections to 60 per cent in national ones. As this is often split between several main parties, the actual mandate of those put into office is significantly lower.[34] In addition, what it means to actually belong to one of these bodies has irrevocably been altered too.

For the political elite, the disengagement of the masses from the electoral process is highly problematic. It exacerbates their own sense of isolation and insecurity, as their democratic mandate and political legitimacy becomes questionable. This has been made worse by the loss of any clear vision and direction,[35] which became particularly pronounced through the gradual demise of the political divide between the old socialist left and the free-market right. Today, the categories of left and right have been expunged of their traditional associations and meanings.[36] Voters are often unable to distinguish between the pronouncements of the various major parties. Now, candidates fight for what they believe to be the centre ground and are desperately seeking issues that may reconnect with, and re-engage, ordinary people. Foremost amongst these have been issues relating to health and security as these resonate with people's personalized sense of vulnerability.

At the informal level of social participation, the changes in society are just as striking. Many have commented on the growing pressures faced by families, communities and neighbourhoods. In his book on this theme, *Bowling Alone*, the American academic Robert Putnam also pointed to the demise of informal clubs, teams and associa-tions.[37] Meeting up with friends occurs less frequently than previously

[34] POWER Inquiry, *Power to the People: An Independent Inquiry into Britain's Democracy*, York, JRCT, 2006.

[35] M. Saatchi, *In Praise of Ideology*, London, Centre for Policy Studies, 2006.

[36] A. Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics*, Cambridge, Polity, 1994. See also F. Furedi, *The Politics of Fear: Beyond Left and Right*, London, Continuum, 2006.

[37] R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000.

too. In other words, people are not just politically disengaged but also, increasingly, socially disconnected. These changes have developed within a generation and their consequences have yet to be fully appreciated. In particular they have helped to transform active, public citizens into passive, privatized individuals.[38] The diminished sense of self that has resulted has further altered people's confidence to deal with problems and willingness to engage in social processes.[39] Not long ago, for instance, across most urban centres, children would go to school on their own. Parents assumed that if there were any problems, other adults would act *in loco parentis* – chastizing their offspring appropriately if they were misbehaving and helping them if they were in trouble. Today, despite the absence of any evidence of increased abductions, abuses or accidents, this straightforward social arrangement no longer holds. The erosion of this unstated and self-evident social good suggests a breakdown of trust, identification and solidarity between adults. In turn this demands the application of numerous personal solutions to what was once a public issue and actually makes the job of parenting harder.[40]

In a myriad of different ways the various social glues that used to give individuals a sense of identity and meaning through the provision of agreed or assumed social structures has gradually come unstuck.

THE RISE OF RISK PERCEPTION

The erosion of collective forms of social association, both in the formal sphere of political conviction and participation, as well as in the informal sphere of everyday life, has had a dramatic impact upon how people view themselves and the world around them.[41] In the past, social networks and norms may have imposed seemingly arbitrary or authoritarian structures and rules upon people, but they also provided meaning, conferred identity and facilitated social processes. Being less connected leaves people less corrected. It allows their

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[38] R. Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1976.

[39] J. Heartfield, *The 'Death of the Subject' Explained*, Sheffield, Perpetuity Press, 2002.

[40] F. Furedi, *Paranoid Parenting: Why Ignoring the Experts May be Best for your Child*, London, Allen Lane, 2001.

[41] A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge, Polity, 1991.

subjective impression of reality to go unmediated or unmoderated through membership of a wider group or trusted community. Without a sense of the possibility of social solutions, and divorced from trusted networks or webs of association by which to provide meaning and a sense of belonging for themselves, people can increasingly become inclined to view events as being random, out of control or inevitable. This has been particularly clear in relation to a growing fear of crime, which is out of all keeping with the reality of crime statistics.[42]

Views that, in the past, would have been filtered and scrutinized through various layers of public knowledge and private insight, often come today to form unchallenged personal frameworks for understanding the world. In such a climate, individual obsessions can grow into all-consuming worldviews that are rarely open to reasoned interrogation or debate. In part, it is this that explains the recent proclivity to emphasize or exaggerate all of the supposed risks that are held to confront us.[43] From BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy, more commonly known as 'mad-cow disease') to GMOs (genetically modified organisms), from the assumed risks presented by mobile phones or their telecommunications masts to the purported link between the MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) triple-vaccine and childhood autism; many developments are now viewed through the prism of a heightened and personalized consciousness of risk. Nor are our fears restricted to the realms of novel scientific or technological products and processes. Many age-old activities and agents have also been reinterpreted through our growing sense of social isolation and fear. Abduction, bullying, crime, the environment and food, form just the first few entries of an ever-expanding lexicon of new concerns. Even relationships and sex are viewed as risky and assessed and managed using an instrumentalist form of risk calculus – to the detriment of both.

However, rather than the world changing any faster today than in the past, or becoming a more dangerous, unpredictable or complex place, it may be that a diminished, more fragile and isolated, sense of

[42] See for example, C. Hale, *Crime in Modern Britiain: Interpreting Trends in Crime*, Harlow, Longman Criminology, 1996; D. Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001; or E. B. Silverman and J-A. Della-Giustina, 'Urban Policing and the Fear of Crime', *Urban Studies*, 38: 5–6 (2001) pp. 941–57.

[43] Furedi, *Culture of Fear*.

self has altered our confidence to deal with change and the problems it gives rise to. Far from it being the inevitable reflexive consequences of manufactured risks in a 'risk society' having an impact upon us,[44] it is our sense of isolation, absence of direction and associated distorted perceptions that lend themselves to identifying everything as a risk. The erosion of a social perspective may also lead to a diminished sense of the possibility that if there truly is a problem needing to be addressed then it is together – with others – that this can best be altered or challenged. In turn, these developments reduce the likelihood of our acting for some greater common good and end up making us less resilient, both as individuals and as a society.

All of these developments have a quite devastating and stultifying impact upon society. The breakdown of collectivities has, in the absence of any coherent replacements, enhanced the sense that isolated individuals have of themselves as being frail and vulnerable. An exaggerated perception of risk lends itself to growing demands for greater regulation and social control.[45] Accordingly, people increasingly look to those in authority to enhance their sense of security by mitigating the worst effects of the natural world and human society, as well as the actions of those who seek to change them.

The contemporary era could be characterized as having an absence of political vision and direction in which the politics of fear, or risk regulation, have provided a hesitant and isolated elite with an agenda and a new, if limited, sense of moral purpose. The authorities have willingly embraced this role.[46] Latching onto the general climate of isolation and insecurity, politicians have learnt to repackage themselves as societal risk managers. But whilst there is a growing understanding that governments have, over recent years, increasingly made use of such a politics of fear, there is little appreciation of quite how widespread this has become.[47] Usually, the phrase is related to certain actions and proposals – such as extending periods of detention without charge, deporting detainees to their countries of origin, introducing identity cards or increasing airport security – for dealing

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[44] U. Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Nottingham, Sage, 1992.

[45] Better Regulation Commission, *Risk, Responsibility and Regulation: Whose Risk is it Anyway?*, London, Whitehall, 2006.

[46] D. L. Altheide, *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crises*, New York, De Gruyter, 2002.

[47] Furedi, *The Politics of Fear*.

with the on-going 'war on terror'. These measures have all been discussed, at various times, in terms suggesting a degree of suspicion towards those seeking to introduce them. Politicians and officials are presented as having an interest in inflating the perceived risks posed by terrorist attacks in order to push through what, at any other time, would have been seen as being unpopular legislation. But that is only the half of it; what critics miss is the extent to which the same arguments have been deployed right across all policy agendas today. The 'act first, find the evidence later' logic of precautionary thinking has been mainstream in environmental and public health circles for quite some time,[48] where it is broadly supported by the same individuals decrying its use in relation to terrorism.

As has been noted elsewhere, when Donald Rumsfeld famously talked of the difficulties he faced in dealing with 'unknown unknowns', he was in fact using language that was already widely used by those at the opposite end of the political spectrum.[49] The demand that science should emphasize uncertainties and unknowns is now widespread, despite the fact that these are not new and that we can only ever learn about what we don't know by starting from what we do know. Radicals now often view the state as an enabling mechanism of social protection. People who might have been expected to seek to organize their own affairs and build their own institutions now turn to the state to resolve matters on their behalf – in the absence of any sense of social solidarity or an ability to deal with problems collectively. Even those environmental and consumer lobby groups with the most vehement anti-state rhetoric look to the state to act as the ultimate regulator and enforcer.[50] Accordingly, politicians pose as the people who will protect us from our fears and regulate the world accordingly. But the demise of any positive sense of the possibility and desirability for social transformation has also led to a reduction in what it is that politicians actually offer the public today. The petty lifestyle concerns they focus on, reflected in incessant debates about smoking, smacking, eating and drinking are unlikely to inspire and

[48] J. Morris (ed.), *Rethinking Risk and the Precautionary Principle*, London, Butterworth-Heinemann, 2001.

[49] B. Durodié, 'The Precautionary Principle – Is it Killing Innovation?', in S. Kumaria (ed.), *An Apology for Capitalism?*, London, Profile Books, 2004, pp. 68–77.

[50] J. Porritt, *Playing Safe: Science and the Environment*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2001.

engage a new generation of voters.[51] Nor – at the other end of the spectrum – do doom-laden predictions relating to global warming and terrorism. Indeed, the more such concerns are highlighted, the more it becomes difficult for the authorities to assuage the insecurities that they have helped to create. Hence, alongside disengagement and alienation, has come a concomitant disillusionment and mistrust in all forms of authority, whether political, corporate or scientific, as these invariably fail to live up to new expectations.[52] This corrosion of trust may replace healthy scepticism with unthinking cynicism.

As expertise itself has, in certain quarters, come to be perceived as elitist, and knowledge as biased or unattainable, in many situations today the public are encouraged, and have become accustomed, to assume the worst and presume a cover-up. In the absence of the old structures this has generated new demands for the attribution of blame and compensation.[53] Image and rumour come to dominate over insight and reason. Myths and conspiracy theories increasingly abound, encouraged by the demand to include public perceptions in decision-making. Focusing on people's perceptions has become the new mainstay of governments, activists, the media and even risk consultants. These suggest that our perceptions of risks are as important – if not more so – than the reality of the risks we face, as perceptions often determine behaviour. Thus it is held that, irrespective of the basis for such fears in scientific fact, their effects are real in social consequence, leaving governments with little choice but to take such concerns onboard and to regulate accordingly.[54]

Such an approach benefits from appearing to take ordinary people's views very seriously. In an age when few participate actively in political life, it seems commendably inclusive and democratic. It is also a godsend to governments bereft of any broader dynamic or direction. Yet to many the assuming or adapting to popular perception is seen as being contemptuous, and as patronizing,

[51] B. Durodié, 'Political Tunnel Vision is Today's Real Terror', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 26 March 2003.

[52] A. B. Seligman, *The Problem of Trust*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000.

[53] C. P. Guzelian, 'Liability and Fear', *Ohio State Law Journal*, 64: 4 (2004), pp. 713–851.

[54] This is the view of Bob Worcester, the founder of the public polling company MORI.

of the public as dismissing them outright. It may also be more damaging.[55]

SOCIAL RESPONSES

Fear is often understood in narrow psychological terms.[56] It is usually taken to be a self-evident emotional response to an extreme or novel situation. But fear is also a social phenomenon, as how people behave in specific circumstances depends upon wider cultural norms, expectations and beliefs.[57] That we become fearful as individuals or as a society is not simply dependent upon the threats that confront us, but also on our ability to make sense of those threats and the significance attributed to them.[58]

In fact, how we as individuals, and as a society, define and respond to crises is only partly dependent upon their causal agents and scale. Historically evolving cultural attitudes and outlooks, as well as other social factors, play a far greater role. Our degree of trust in authority, in other human beings and in ourselves shapes our perceptions and determines whether we consider a particular problem to be a disaster in the first place.[59] There is, for instance, a contemporary cultural proclivity to speculate wildly as to the likelihood of adverse events and to demand high-profile responses and capabilities based on worst-case scenarios. In the end, this only serves to distract attention and divert social resources in a way that may not be warranted by a more pragmatic assessment and prioritization of all of the risks that we face. Technique and technology certainly help in the face of adversity, although the fact that particular societies both choose and have the capacity to prioritize such elements is also ultimately socially

[55] B. Durodié, 'Limitations of Public Dialogue in Science and the Rise of New "Experts" ', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 6: 4 (2003) pp. 82–92.

[56] R. W. Dozier, *Fear Itself: The Origin and Nature of the Powerful Emotion that Shapes Our Lives and Our World*, New York, Thomas Dunne Books, 1998.

[57] See for example C. Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006; or J. Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History*, London, Virago Press, 2005.

[58] D. L. Scruton (ed.), *Sociophobics: The Anthropology of Fear*, Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1986.

[59] E. L. Quarantelli, *What is a Disaster?*, London, Routledge, 1998.

determined. More broadly, it is possible to say that resilience – loosely defined as the ability of individuals and society to keep going after a shock – is most definitely a function of cultural attitude or outlook.

Cultural values point to why it is that, at certain times and in certain societies, a widespread loss of life fails to be a point of discussion, whilst at other times or in a different society, even a very limited loss can become a key cultural reference point.[60] This evolving context and framework of cultural meanings explains such variations as our widespread indifference to the daily loss of life upon our roads, as opposed to, for instance, the shock that ensued across the globe from the loss of just seven lives aboard the *Challenger* spacecraft in 1986. The loss of *Challenger* represented a low point in the cultural assessment of human technological capabilities. It was a blow to our assumption of steady scientific and technological progress that no number of everyday car accidents could replicate. It fed into and drove a debate that continues to this day regarding our relationship with nature and a presumed human arrogance in seeking to pursue goals beyond our sphere. Hence, emergencies and disasters, including terrorist attacks, take on a different role, dependent upon what they represent to particular societies at particular times, rather than solely on the basis of objective indicators such as real costs and lives lost. In this sense, our response to terrorist incidents, such as that which occurred on 11 September 2001, teaches us far more about ourselves than about the terrorists.[61]

On the whole, the history of human responses to disaster, including terrorist attacks, is quite heartening. People tend to be at their most cooperative and focused at such times; there are few instances of panic.[62] The recent earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean serve as a salutary reminder of this. Amidst the tales of devastation and woe, numerous individual and collective acts of bravery and sacrifice stand out, reminding us of the ordinary courage, cooperation and conviction that are part of the human condition at such

[60] E. L. Quarantelli and R. R. Dynes, 'Response to Social Crisis and Disaster', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 3: 1 (1977), pp. 23–49.

[61] B. Durodié, 'Cultural Precursors and Psychological Consequences of Contemporary Western Responses to Acts of Terror', in S. Wessely and V. Krasnov (eds), *Psychological Aspects of the New Terrorism: A NATO Russia Dialogue*, Amsterdam, IOS Press, 2005, pp. 37–53.

[62] B. Durodié and S. Wessely, 'Resilience or Panic? The Public and Terrorist Attack', *The Lancet*, 360: 9349 (2002), pp. 1901–2.

times. People often come together in an emergency in new and largely unexpected ways, reaffirming core social bonds and their common humanity. Research reveals communities that were considered to have benefited in some ways through having had to cope with adversity or a crisis.[63] Rather than being psychologically scarred, it appears equally possible to emerge enhanced. In other words, whilst a disaster, including a terrorist attack, destroys physical and economic capital, it has the potential to serve as a rare, if unfortunate, opportunity in contemporary society to build up social capital.

Of course, terrorists hope that their acts will lead to a breakdown in social cohesion. Whether this comes true is up to us. Civilians are the true first responders and first line of defence at such times; their support prior to – and their reactions subsequent to – any incident are crucial. Disasters act as one of the best indicators of the strength of pre-existing social bonds across a community. Societies that are together, pull together – those that are apart, are more likely to fall apart.

Whilst there is much empirical evidence pointing to the positive elements of ordinary human responses to disaster, it is usually after the immediate danger has subsided that the real values of society as a whole come to the fore.[64] It is then that the cultural outlook and impact of social leaders and their responses begin to hold sway. These determine whether the focus is on reconstruction and the future, or on retribution and the past. Sadly, despite the variety of ways in which it is possible to interpret and respond to different emergencies, the onus today seems to veer away from a celebration of the human spirit and societal resilience, towards a focus on compensation and individual vulnerability. The recent trend to encourage mass outpourings of public grief, minutes of silence or some other symbols of 'conspicuous compassion' is likely to be negative in that regard.

In the long run, cultural confusion as to who we are, what we stand for, and where we are going undermines our attempts at building social resilience. Contemporary society may seem less coherent and less compliant than it was a generation or so ago, but above all it appears less confident as to its aims and purposes. This can not be

[63] F. Furedi, 'Disaster and Contemporary Consciousness: The Changing Cultural Frame for the Experience of Adversity', draft report 2004, available at http://www.terrorismresearch.net/finalreports/Furedi/FurediReportFull.pdf.

[64] R. Dynes, 'On Disasters and Popular Culture', University of Delaware Disaster Research Centre Preliminary Paper 295, Newark, University of Delaware, 2000.

resolved by training ourselves to respond technically to disasters, but by a much broader level of debate and engagement in society, not just in relation to terrorism and other crises, but to broader social issues. Presumably, people are prepared to risk their lives fighting fires or fighting wars, not so that their children can, in their turn, grow up to fight fires and fight wars, but because they believe that there is something more important to life worth fighting for. It is the absence of any discussion as to what that something more important is that leaves us effectively unarmed in the face of adversity today.

SOCIAL RESILIENCE

In September 1940, at the height of the Blitz, 5,730 people lost their lives in London alone. This is one hundred times larger than the number killed by the London bombers on 7 July 2005. By the end of the Second World War the final fatality count in London had reached 30,000. How could the British population be so resilient in the face of such adversity? In his landmark study, representing the official interpretation of these events, Richard Titmuss suggested the key factors to have been clear leadership, equitable treatment and the provision of full employment to keep people occupied.[65] Others, such as Angus Calder, have questioned this interpretation, pointing to the existence of looting, a significant black market and juvenile delinquency as evidence that the famed 'Blitz spirit' was not all that it was cracked up to be.[66] Nevertheless, it is clear that the overall response was a remarkable display of fortitude. And whilst government motives may have been brought into question, at the time and subsequently, at least it is reasonably clear that it had some motives. During the Second World War, there was a clear sense of the need to carry on with normal life and to maintain everyday roles and responsibilities. Most of the population was actively engaged in the war effort and there was a particular focus on ensuring that people would not develop a 'shelter mentality'.[67]

[65] R. M. Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy*, Nottingham, HMSO, 1950.

[66] A. Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1991.

[67] E. Jones, R. Woolven, B. Durodié and S. Wessely, 'Civilian Morale During the Second World: Responses to Air Raids Re-Examined', *Social History of Medicine*, 17: 3 (2004), pp. 463–79.

Such responses reveal a number of important lessons for today. Now, it is assumed by some that the world has been irrevocably changed by the events of 9/11 and 7/7. In other words, normality may never be restored. What is more, as the public cannot be directly engaged in counter-terrorist activities they are passively encouraged to prepare themselves for the worst. However, one of the most striking changes in the disaster literature of the last 50 years has been in how it is assumed that ordinary human beings react in a crisis.[68] Beyond the grossly distorted belief in the likelihood of panic lies a more subtle, yet unspoken shift in cultural assumptions that undermines our capacity to be strong, both as individuals and as a society. That is, that in the past, the assumption on the whole, as borne out by actual human behaviour, was that people were resilient and would seek to cope in adverse circumstances. Today, there is a widespread presumption of human vulnerability that influences both our discussion of disasters well before they have occurred, and that seeks to influence our responses to them long afterwards. A new army of therapeutic counsellors and other assorted professionals are there to 'help' people recover.[69] This presupposes our inability to do so unaided. Indeed, the belief that we can cope and are robust is often presented as outdated and misguided, or as an instance of being 'in denial'. In some ways, this latter element, more than any other, best exemplifies and clarifies some of the existing confusions and struggles that lie ahead. If self-reliance is old fashioned and help-seeking actively promoted, for whatever well-intended reason, then we are unlikely to see a truly resilient society emerge. This cultural shift is reflected in the figures that reveal that whereas in the United Kingdom, in the period of trade union militancy and unrest known as the 'winter of discontent' of 1979, there were 29.5 million days lost through strikes, in 2002 there were 33 million days lost through stress.[70]

As reflected in how the word 'risk' is predominantly used, people have effectively shifted from being active agents of history to becom-

[68] Furedi, *Therapy Culture*.

[69] S. Rose, J. Bisson, and S. Wessely, 'A Systematic Review of Single-Session Psychological Interventions ("Debriefing") Following Trauma', *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, 72: 4 (2003), pp. 176–84.

[70] C. Marsden and J. Hyland, 'Britain: 20 Years Since the Year-Long Miners' Strike', World Socialist website, 2004, available at http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/mar2004/mine-m05.shtml.

ing the passive objects of it. This may benefit social leaders lacking a clear agenda or direction. It may indeed be easier to manage the sick than those who struggle, but it also precludes the possibility of encouraging and establishing real resilience, resolve and purpose across society. The standard way of dealing with disaster today is one that prioritizes pushing the public out beyond the yellow-tape perimeter put up by the authorities. At best the public are merely exhorted to display their support and to trust the professionals.[71] Effectively, people are denied any role, responsibility or even insight into their own situation at such times. Yet, despite this, ordinary human beings are at their most social and rational in a crisis. It is this that should be supported, rather than subsumed or even subverted.

Handling social concerns over the possibility of a terrorist attack is no easy feat. In part, this is because it could be argued that social fears today have little to do with the actuality of the presumed threats that confront us.[72] Those fears are in large measure an expression of social isolation and mistrust, combined with an absence of direction and a crisis of confidence amongst the elite. The starting point to establishing real resilience and truly effective solutions will be to put the actual threat posed into an appropriate context. This means being honest as to the objective evidence, as well as being able to clarify the social basis of subjective fears. The incessant debate on the possibility and consequences of an attack using chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons, is a case in point.[73] Whilst Western societies have debated such nightmare scenarios as if they were real, terrorists have continued to display their proficiency in, and proclivity to use, conventional weapons such as high explosives, car bombs and surface-to-air missiles. Above all, if as a society we are to ascribe an appropriate cultural meaning to the events of 11 September 2001 or 7 July 2005 – one that does not enhance domestic concerns and encourage us to become ever-more dependent on a limited number of professionals who will tell the public how to lead their lives at such times – then we need to promote a far more significant political debate as to our aims and purposes as a society.

[71] T. Glass and M. Schoch-Spana, 'Bioterrorism and the People: How to Vaccinate a City Against Panic', *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, 34: 2 (2002), pp. 217–23.

[72] P. Hubbard, 'Fear and Loathing at the Multiplex: Everyday Anxiety in the Post-Industrial City', *Capital and Class*, 80 (2003), pp. 51–76.

[73] B. Durodié, 'Facing the Possibility of Bioterrorism', *Current Opinion in Biotechnology*, 15: 3 (2004), pp. 264–8.

The logic of this argument is that there is a need to change the cultural outlook – certainly a daunting task. That would require clarification of and agreement on a common direction, and then a process of creating a wide consensus around it. These are the crucial political challenges in contemporary representative democratic politics. The reluctance to engage in this fundamentally political process and the clear preference to concentrate instead upon more limited technical goals leaves us profoundly ill-equipped for the future. It speaks volumes for our existing state of resilience and may serve to make matters worse. Bizarrely, few of the authorities concerned consider it to be their responsibility to lead in this matter, nor do they believe such cultural change; through political argument rather than the more limited behaviour modification schemes they prefer, to be a realistic possibility. Yet, in the eventuality of a major civil emergency they hope that the public will pay attention to the risk warnings they provide and act accordingly. By then it will be too late.