Chapter 10
Beyond the Precautionary Principle:
Is Terrorism a Real Risk?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter centers on the discussion around terrorism. While some scholars emphasize on terrorism as a risk, others alert on the limitations of thinking terrorism within the field of risk. This does not mean that terrorism does not exist, it is a big problem for urbanized contexts, but it escapes to the control of laycitizens. Following Niklas Luhman’s definition we exert a criticism on those who think terrorism as a risk. This piece interrogated on the epistemological border of terrorism as well as the interest of publics and audiences to consume the others’ mourning as a form of entertainment. This trend was facilitated by the unification of risk and threat notions. As we have explained, terrorism as-a-risk forms an ideological discourse in order for the global elite to keep its privilege position but also to open the doors towards a new face of capitalism, we have dubbed Thana Capitalism. While people watch the others’ suffering in order to confirm their status, it produces a vicious circle which is conducive to what Baudrillard dubbed as “the spectacle of disasters”.

INTRODUCTION

From Chernobyl onwards, the question of risk has been installed in the politics of industrial societies (Moore & Burgess, 2011). Discussion has proceeded in two contrasting waves, which dispute the meaning of the issue (Beck, 1992; 1995; 2005). Though these groups have received diverse names, for operational and practical purpose, we use the term “culturalists and probabilists” to identify these schools. While the former understands risk as a social construct whose function is to keep society united, the latter examines probabilities as valid source for predicting disasters and hazardous situations (Skoll & Korstanje, 2013). The problem for the probabilists is the indeterminacy of the role played by the culture in over estimating some risks while ignoring others.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7119-3.ch010
To some extent, each culture has developed its own system to create risks which vary with the economic order (Douglas & Wildavsky 1983; Cahan et al., 2007; Hopkins 2005; Sennett, 2011). If Americans are terrified by global terrorism (Altheide, 2006; Boscarino et al., 2006; Chermak 2003; Skoll, 2010; Howie, 2012; Korstanje, 2013; Skoll & Korstanje, 2013; Sageman, 2014). Argentineans feel the same terror for local crime or offenses against property (Kessler, 2009; Miguez & Isla, 2010; Buvinic, 2008; Korstanje, 2009a). Culturalists argue that risks serve as a disciplinary mechanism to enhance political legitimacy (Barry, Osborne & Rose 1996; Foucault, 2009). Probabilists, in contrast, have focused their attention on the effects, not the nature, of risks. For example, we may drive a vehicle at high speeds putting our life at risk. The probabilities of suffering road accidents, though we may not know the precise statistics, are higher among speeders than other drivers (Luhmann, 1993; Giddens, 1991). Regardless of culture or personal perceptions, risks can be predicted using algorithms and mathematical models.

Despite such predictive capabilities, culturalists criticize probabilists for not understanding the real nature of risks and their relation to the paradox of technology (Korstanje and Skoll, 2013). While science and the production of knowledge are devoted to mitigating risk, other, new and more dangerous risks may arise. The discrepancies between quantitative and qualitative methods add another point of contention (Waterton & Wynne, 1999). Probabilists such as C. Sunstein assert that emotions obscure the horizon in the decision-making process. Neglect of risk works by the evaluation of biased landscapes regarding the probabilities of occurrence, but this does not mean that risks cannot be prevented by using mathematical models of correlation and regression (Sunstein, 2002a; 2002b; 2006).

A third position in this debate merges the arguments to understand the issue as a probabilistic but without ignoring that it is based on cultural contexts (Slovic, 1987; Lash, 2000). In The Corrosion of Character, Richard Sennett (2011) examined the social role of risk in daily life. He argues that late capitalism weakens social bonds, and thereby reduces trust in, and responsibility for institutions for the protection of citizens. Coming from increased uncertainty, risks encourage the creation of precautionary measures. Here, a class divide appears as elites divest their responsibilities while the work force assumes the burden of the risks. The discourse of change in post-modernity is designed to give ordinary people the responsibility for shaping their own destiny and development. The present chapter formulates the thesis that risk alludes to a disciplinary mechanism of control that organizes the asymmetries created by globalization and hyper-mobility. At the same time, and paradoxically, consumers embrace the illusion that the consuming life will lead to a dream world, which will enhance their status. Nonetheless, by their pursuit of consumption and accumulation of property they increase their risk of loss and undermine their purchasing power.

As this backdrop, the present chapter outlines the epistemological borders of risk, interrogating on the role of media configuring terrorism as one of the most terrible risks West faces in the future. Although we accept terrorism is not a good thing, the potentialities of existent terrorist cell to cause major damages to developed societies are of lower probabilities. Aside from this, at accepting terrorism-as-a-risk people adopt the discourse that they should work to improve their state of security. Here we hold polemically the thesis that terrorism is not a risk, it is a hazard because modern citizens have no possibility to avoid their effects. Terrorism imposes to lay-citizens who are instrumentalized as commodities to press the nation-state. When tourists travel to Egypt or Bali they are not responsible for their decision nor having any possibilities to elude the imminent attack. In this line, terrorism operates-following Baudrillard-not only in the horizons of symbolism, it is based on a hypothetical future from where nation-state elaborates and imposes policies otherwise would be neglected.