

PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY IN A CULTURE OF DOOM

Paper presented by Dr Bill Durodié on 4 March 2010 to the IVth ESCI (European Security Conference Initiative) & CPSI (Changing Perceptions of Security and Interventions) Final Symposium Zugspitze Conference Centre, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

APOCALYPSE NOW

Who was it that said recently; *'it really is all of humanity that is under threat'*, and what were they talking about?

The sorry fact is that it could almost be anyone, about anything. Maybe it related to international terrorism, or concerns about new scientific developments such as the advent of nanotechnology? Alternatively, it could have been said about the growing discussion of a supposed obesity epidemic in society, or the apparent spate and impact of earthquakes worldwide.

Such phrases are used so profligately, and by so many social leaders and commentators, nowadays that they have almost entirely lost their original purchase and meaning.

In fact, this particular formulation was uttered by Dr. Margaret Chan, the director-general of the World Health Organisation (WHO), as she raised the pandemic threat level from four to five in response to the outbreak of swine flu early last year (1).

Notably, she seemed somewhat more circumspect, (or maybe she had been chastised), when she subsequently increased the alert to the top of the WHO's six-point scale, thereby declaring a full-blown pandemic.

At this later stage she only advised that this would *'not mean, in any way, that we are facing the end of the world'* (2).

But any damage was already done.

Unfortunately, in recent years, possibly with a view to promoting their areas of work and interest, there has been a marked tendency amongst certain professionals to use apocalyptic language in describing almost any emergency.

We are constantly warned of conflicts and catastrophes, as well as epidemics and extinctions. And reference is repeatedly made at international conferences, such as this one, to our supposed states of insecurity and vulnerability.

The real danger is that these terms help to shape a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Part of the problem, it is held, is inherent to our period of globalization and modernity. This, it is asserted, generates uncertainty and unknowns. But when was human existence ever certain or fully understood?

And anyone who thinks that living in an increasingly inter-connected world is risky should go off to live in the jungle on their own to appreciate why it is that societies have evolved the way they have.

Whatever happens, for these doom-mongers, the world – it would seem – is always getting worse. And the source – as well as the victim – of these problems, is held to be abundantly clear – humanity itself.

This strikes me as both implausible and self-defeating.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS

In fact, what is a disaster is both contextually dependent and socially contested.

Emergencies are acted upon differently according to what they represent to particular societies at specific times. This social element explains why it is that, at certain moments, and in specific circumstances, a widespread loss of life can fail to be a point of discussion, but in other situations, even relatively minor events may become key reference points.

Earthquakes, for instance, may appear natural, but their impact is mediated by our level of development, as well as the meaning we attribute to them.

The first significant earthquake of the modern era, occurred almost halfway through the century of the Enlightenment, in 1755, in Lisbon. Debates were already raging then between the old deists and the new secularists, and this event, occurring as it did on 'All Souls Day', in the heart of Catholic Europe, posed quite a conundrum for believers.

It marked a turning point in history between a period when humanity accepted its fate stoically at the hands of a presumed God, and one where a new sense of human agency emerged, shaped by a determination that our own aims and purposes could shape history and mitigate the impact of such adversities in future.

More recently, the events of September the 11th 2001 can also be viewed from one of two diametrically opposed perspectives. For some, (the majority possibly), these atrocities are held to point to how vulnerable advanced capitalist countries have become through their complex structures, to the actions of a determined few.

Another, maybe more prosaic, interpretation would be to point to how the total cost of 9/11, both in terms of reparation and compensation, amounted to little more than 1% of US GDP in any one year. A cost rapidly eclipsed by the size of the various financial crises and collapses that have since ensued.

In other words, how we define, understand and respond to such a situation is not solely determined by the number of lives lost or their financial cost, or even by the causal agent of the emergency, but rather by the meaning we, as a society, attribute to it. Historically evolving cultural attitudes, outlooks and narratives are extremely important (3).

So it is that culture, communication and language can come to have a determining role in our perception of what is a disaster or a crisis. And our responses often teach us more about ourselves than about the problem at hand.

Not being able to make sense of threats, or draw any positive conclusions from adverse events can be quite disarming. This determines whether our focus is on reconstruction, resilience and the future, or who to blame, our supposed vulnerabilities and the past.

Inflating, or being confused by, the risks we face, also impacts on our responses, as does the degree of trust – or not – that the public may have in the authorities charged with protecting them from adversity.

So, significantly, how these latter frame particular incidents can play a determining role in their outcome, as this shapes or leads public perceptions and behaviour, whether our leaders know it or not.

MANILA EXPOSED

After the recent deluge brought about by typhoon Ketsana to Manila, the capital of the Philippines, Dr. Nathaniel Cruz, head of the weather services bureau for the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA), announced that the flood that ensued was caused by historically record rainfall (4).

Well, 'yes', and 'no'. Those who follow such matters closely will know that weather records are relatively easily broken. The record Dr. Cruz was referring to was that for the most precipitation at a specific recording station – in Quezon City – over any 24-hour period. This had been 341.3mm in the first six hours alone, thereby surpassing the previous record of 334mm recorded in June 1967.

But without disputing the severity or extent of the problems that ensued, one can, and ought to, question the framing of matters in this way. Whether this relatively intense – but short-lived – downpour was really worse than that from any of the

63 typhoons that lasted over 10 – and as long as 18 – days of the 445 typhoons that struck the Philippines between 1902 and 1921, is a moot point (5).

The region is well-known to suffer from such phenomena – 25% of all typhoons strike the Philippine Area of Responsibility (PAR). Indeed, cyclones bearing rain are at the root of its agricultural wealth. But accordingly, major floods occurred in every decade of the twentieth century, sometimes causing thousands of fatalities. As recently as 1990, typhoon Ruping destroyed large parts of Cebu.

The reasons for this are well-documented by Professor Greg Bankoff of the University of Auckland in New Zealand (6). The topography of Manila itself, situated between Manila Bay and a large inland lake, Laguna de Bay – whose water levels have risen due to silting-up – is hardly ideal.

Then, the twentieth century witnessed a dramatic process of urbanization with the population of the capital rising from 328,939 inhabitants in 1903 to some 11,553,427 in 2008. Roads and buildings enlarged the impervious surface areas and the poor have little choice but to settle in low-lying areas, including along the system of *esteros* – modified water channels built during the colonial period – that have hardly been improved since, and now also bear the brunt of solid waste discharges not collected by the municipal authorities.

DOMAIN EXPANSION

Despite these evidently political failings, a narrative has developed that – far from promoting the much-needed economic growth and infrastructure improvements – proposes the very opposite be applied – restraint and human humility in the face of natural forces.

Writing in the Singapore *Straits Times* in the aftermath of these events – as well as a series of earthquakes across the South Pacific and Sumatra, and dust storms in Australia – senior writer, Andy Ho, pointed to the supposed evidence that these events could all be linked to global warming (7).

This was despite noting that the detection and reporting of such events inevitably increases with our technical capabilities, and that the definition of a disaster – being largely dependent on numbers affected, and reparation costs – necessarily leads to a rise in incidence along with population and wealth.

In Manila, Dr. Cruz had suggested that the intensity of the typhoon “*could be ... a manifestation of climate change*”, adding that “[*m*]aybe ten years ago the floods might have not been this bad”. Unsurprisingly, many commentators discussing the matter subsequently omitted any reference to the speculative character of these statements.

According to the American academic, Joel Best, “[o]nce a problem gains widespread recognition and acceptance, there is a tendency to piggyback new claims on to the old name, to expand the problem’s domain” (8). Another recent example has been the tendency by environmentalist groups to promote their long-standing opposition to nuclear power increasingly through reference to the contemporary fear of terrorist attacks.

But it is not just interest groups making use of such tactics. Politicians, officials, businesses and the media – as well as NGOs and other civil society groups – have all become increasingly adept at posing the issues they wish to see being addressed and prioritized through such means.

The profligate use of the term ‘*pandemic*’ in the early phase of the worldwide H1N1 outbreak, also showed how many using the term did not appear to understand – or care – that this applied to the geographical spread, rather than to the occurrence – let-alone severity – of the virus. Others do not seem to appreciate the meaning of the word ‘*toxic*’, or how ‘*resources*’ depend on human resourcefulness, as much as on supposedly natural limits.

Writing in the revised edition of his 1997 book ‘*Culture of Fear*’, the UK-based sociologist, Frank Furedi, noted how reference to the phrase “*at risk*” increased almost ten-fold in British broadsheet newspapers over the six-year period covering the end of the 1990s (9).

This cultivation of a language of vulnerability is unlikely to resolve things. Instead, by presenting human-beings as both the cause and victims of powerful forces, beyond our control, it helps breed a climate of apathy and disengagement.

REAL RESPONSES

Fortunately, the history of human responses to disaster – including terrorist attacks – is actually quite heartening. People tend to be at their most cooperative and focused at such times. There are few instances of mass panic (10). Amidst the tales of devastation and woe from the recent earthquakes and floods, numerous individual and collective acts of bravery and sacrifice stand out, reminding us of the ordinary courage and conviction that are part of the human condition.

People often come together in an emergency in new and unexpected ways, using the experience to re-affirm social bonds and their collective humanity. Research reveals communities that were considered to be better off through having had to cope with adversity or a crisis (11). Rather than being psychologically scarred, it appears equally possible to be enhanced.

Ordinary people are always the real ‘*first-responders*’ in any emergency. And disasters – whilst destroying physical and economic capital – also present a

tremendous opportunity for the creation and enhancement of social capital – so long as the spontaneous need to exert and assume control is not subsumed to the agendas and presumptions of existing or external authorities.

What may be needed most from outside agencies at such times then – in addition to physical aid and support – is a degree of moderation and circumspection in attempting to impose their interpretation of the events onto the situation and thereby seeking to steer future courses of action.

Sadly, there are countless examples where this is not the case. Cutting-out this growing, profligate and counter-productive narrative of doom would be a good place to start.

SECURITIZATION

The tendency to associate an increasing number of phenomena – from climate change and energy supplies to population growth and the provision of food – with security, is also likely to yield significant problems.

Not least of these is that once an issue becomes securitized, it also becomes open to the rules of discussion that relate to national security matters. Not only is this likely to lead to censorship, but in the future we may begin to see real conflicts emerge as countries are held not to have acted correctly in relation to what, once upon a time, would have been regarded as local environmental matters.

It seems, in this regards, that those who once colonized the world territorially in the nineteenth century, are now seeking to re-colonize it mentally, with their dystopian visions of the future, today.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) Margaret Chan, *Press Announcement at Emergency WHO Meeting*, Geneva, 29 April 2009, available at; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8025931.stm>
- (2) Margaret Chan, *Interview to El País*, 3 May 2009, cited at; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/may/04/swine-flu-pandemic-alert>
- (3) Bill Durodié, *Limitations of Risk Management: Dealing with Disasters and Building Social Resilience*, Politik, Vol.8, No.1, March 2004
- (4) Nathaniel Cruz, cited by Andreo Calonzo, *Epic Flood in Metro Manila caused by Record Rainfall*, GMANews.TV available at; <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/173232/epic-flood-in-metro-manila-caused-by-record-rainfall>

- (5) Greg Bankoff, *Cultures of Disaster: Society and Natural Hazard in the Philippines*, Routledge, 2003, p.44
- (6) Greg Bankoff, *Constructing Vulnerability: The Historical, Natural and Social Generation of Flooding in Metropolitan Manila*, *Disasters*, Vol.27, No.3, 2003
- (7) Andy Ho, *Heavens and Earth in Turmoil*, *The Straits Times*, 3 October 2009
- (8) Joel Best, *Random Violence: How we Talk about New Crimes and New Victims*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999, p.168
- (9) Frank Furedi, *Culture of Fear: Risk-Taking and the Morality of Low Expectations*, Cassell 1997 and Continuum 2002
- (10) Bill Durodié and Simon Wessely, *Resilience or Panic? The Public and Terrorist Attack*, *The Lancet*, Vol.360, No.9349, 2002
- (11) Frank Furedi, *From the Narrative of the Blitz to the Rhetoric of Vulnerability*, *Cultural Sociology*, Vol.1, No.2, 2007