



World at Risk

Ulrich Beck

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ULRICH BECK

Translated by Ciaran Cronin

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This English edition © Polity Press, 2009.

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

The translation of this work was supported by a grant from the Goethe-Institut that is funded by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4200-0
ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4201-7(pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10 on 12 pt Stempel Garamond
by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

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Acknowledgements

Risk Society was published in German in 1986. In 1999, *World Risk Society* appeared in English and was translated into more than ten languages, though not into German. The attempt to translate it into German in a lightly revised version proved to be untenable. Too much has occurred in the meantime, the learning curve in responding to global risks is simply too vast. Hence this new book.

There was no shortage of reasons for writing it. They reside, first, in the endless chain of events in which reality and the mass media are co-authoring ever new chapters of 'world risk society'. What seemed larger than life twenty years ago has proved to be the script that reality has been following: 'We are all trapped in the global danger zone' (*Tagesanzeiger*, Zurich, 2006). On the other hand, the trend towards a globalization of risks is also reflected in the reception of *Risk Society*. My analyses have by now been translated into more than thirty languages and have triggered heated debates across nations and specialist fields – in sociology and political science, in law and history, in philosophy, anthropology, ecology and engineering. Furthermore, studies on diverse topics in the most varied empirical contexts have contributed to articulating the contours, paradoxes and contradictions of (world) risk society. This worldwide discourse on *Risk Society* stimulated me to further reflection and to write *World at Risk*. I would like to mention here just the inspiring works of Joost van Loon (*Risk and Technological Culture: Towards a Sociology of Virulence*) and Piet Strydom (*Risk, Environment and Society: Ongoing Debates, Current Issues and Future Prospects*).

Earlier versions of one or more of the chapters presented here were commented upon by Jakob Arnoldi, Boris Holzer, Edgar Grande, Christoph Lau, Daniel Levy, Stefan May, Martin Muslow, Angelika Pofert and Natan Sznajder, to whom I am also sincerely grateful. The context for this book was provided by cooperation and discussion within the Collaborative Research Centre 'Reflexive Modernization', which enjoys the generous support of the German Research Foundation. Without Raimund Fellingner, friend and editor, this book would never have been written. I would also like

viii Acknowledgements

to thank Almut Kleine and Waltraud Zoldos for their work in typing the manuscript.

On this occasion, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim encouraged me to tame my academicism and to indulge my pleasure in writing. Hence this book is addressed not to sociologists alone but to all of those who are keen to understand our age of man-made uncertainties.

Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
1 Introduction: Staging Global Risk	1
2 Relations of Definition as Relations of Domination: Who Decides What is and is Not a Risk?	24
3 The 'Cosmopolitan Moment' of World Risk Society or: Enforced Enlightenment	47
4 Clash of Risk Cultures or: The Overlapping of the State of Normalcy and the State of Exception	67
5 Global Public Sphere and Global Subpolitics or: How Real is Catastrophic Climate Change?	81
6 The Provident State or: On the Antiquatedness of Linear Pessimism Concerning Progress	109
7 Knowledge or Non-Knowing? Two Perspectives of 'Reflexive Modernization'	115
8 The Insurance Principle: Criticism and Counter-Criticism	129
9 Felt War, Felt Peace: Staging Violence	140
10 Global Inequality, Local Vulnerability: The Conflict Dynamics of Environmental Hazards Must be Studied within the Framework of Methodological Cosmopolitanism	160
11 Critical Theory of World Risk Society	187

vi Contents

12	Dialectics of Modernity: How the Crises of Modernity Follow from the Triumphs of Modernity	212
	Notes	235
	References and Bibliography	243
	Index	261

Introduction: Staging Global Risk

The academic debate concerning climate change is over, but the political and moral responses have reached a new level. . . . Human beings, as researchers have established with a unanimity rare with such multi-faceted issues, bear the primary blame for global warming. . . . The real novelty, perhaps even the historic message of this report, is the conclusiveness with which all evasions and doubts concerning the human causation of climate change are dispelled.

Müller-Jung 2007 (referring to IPCC 2007)

The anticipation of catastrophe is changing the world

A suicide bomber attack in which terrorists with British passports planned to blow up several passenger aircraft en route from Heathrow to the United States with liquid explosives did *not* occur during the summer of 2006 under the spotlight of the global mass media because the British police, in cooperation with international colleagues, managed to intervene on time and arrest the suspected perpetrators. On 6 November, barely three months after the thwarted attack, a new EU-wide regulation came into force that imposes severe restrictions on the transport of liquids in aircraft cabins. The new security measures are the worldwide reaction to *anticipated* terrorist attacks which, as stated, did *not* occur in a certain place, i.e. London. They place restrictions on the freedom of millions of passengers for the foreseeable future. The passengers, in whose minds the terrorist threat has become lodged, accepted such restrictions on their liberties without demur.

The power of the powerless or: The risk to the reputation of banks

The pressure exerted by a small Westphalian environmental group is jeopardizing a multibillion dollar nuclear generation project in Bulgaria. Following protests by this internationally networked civic group opposed to nuclear power, Deutsche Bank and the HypoVereinsbank withdrew their financing

2 Introduction

of the Belene nuclear power station. The justification offered was the 'high reputation risk' that forced the banks on to the defensive. Allegedly this had nothing to do with the evaluation of the project, even from an environmental point of view. The measure was solely due to the protests of the group Urgewalt, Ausgestrahlt and its European partners. The anticipated nuclear threat which might be posed by the planned Bulgarian nuclear power plant in the future was publicly denounced by a small West German group active across Europe in protest actions picked up by the media – for example, outside the Deutsche Bank – with the result that the silent powerbrokers of global capitalism, the banks, gave in without a murmur.

Segregating risk embryos

The successes of human genetics and reproductive medicine mean that parents can now select embryos whose genetic profiles promise a reduced risk of illness. They are taking advantage of the opportunities provided by reproductive medicine to 'weed out' embryos with predispositions, for instance, for cancer – which will not break out in later life with certainty but only with a certain degree of probability – and to bring potentially healthy children into the world. All couples, whether they like it or not, will be confronted with this difficult decision sooner or later. They will have to assess whether their wish to prevent suffering, even though they cannot be certain that it will occur, justifies the conscious selection of an embryo and the 'rejection' of potential children who are bearers of a 'risk gene', however the latter is identified. This can lead simultaneously to a lowering of inhibitions. The growing interest in the early detection and elimination of the risk of cancer through 'genetic screening' is symptomatic of a growing tolerance for genetic selection. It is also contributing to the use of pre-implantation diagnosis to identify indicators that are less concerned with serious illnesses and ultimately even give effect to preferences and prejudices. And although there are in the meantime thousands of apparently healthy babies in the United States who underwent these interventions at the pre-embryonic stage, concerns over their unknown long-term effects cannot be simply brushed aside.

The inundation of London, New York and Tokyo

In November 2006, the British foreign minister Margaret Beckett stated that wars fought over limited resources – land, drinking water, oil – are as old as human history. Furthermore, she stated that climate change is threatening to reduce the availability of these resources in some of the most unstable regions of the world, with Africa and the Middle East being the most dramatically affected. If climate change represents a foreign policy issue in this sense, then

the converse also holds, namely, foreign policy must become part of the solution to the problems thrown up by climate change. If global warming leads to increases the temperature of the earth by 4 to 5 degrees Celsius, London, New York and Tokyo could disappear into the sea. In order to prevent 'local' problems, such as the inundation of London, therefore, global initiatives, and ultimately a 'global deal', are required. To this end, it is not only necessary to spur the environmental offender number one, the United States, into action. We must also succeed in finding or inventing a compromise formula for global justice in a world in which both wealth and risks are radically unequally distributed. At any rate, this is becoming a tangible task and a concrete utopia to which every country should contribute simply because it is in its own most basic national interest.

Changing sides

A paradigm shift is taking place in climate policy. It is becoming apparent that the sovereignty of the market represents a fatal threat given the danger of catastrophic climate change. As a result, major sectors of the transnational economy have switched sides and are jostling for favourable starting positions in the competition over the markets for environmental technologies and renewable energy sources. But this also means that a new alliance between civic movements and the large corporations is emerging. In January 2007, American companies called on President George W. Bush to make an environmental conversion. The managers pleaded for an improved climate policy based on state regulation on a global scale.

In Europe and California, the state and environmental movements are forming an alliance against the motor industry. Because voluntary undertakings on the part of the firms have proven to be ineffective, EU Commissioner Stavros Dimas and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger of California are resorting to compulsory measures, namely, sharp reductions in carbon dioxide emissions. This is painful for the motor industry, especially for the German. In both Germany and in California the neoliberal alliance between state and capital is open to challenge.

World ugliness contest

The 'existential concern' which is being awakened across the world by global risks has long since led to a risky game for survival, to a world 'ugliness contest' over the suppression of large-scale risks. The incalculable threats to which climate change is giving rise are supposed to be 'combated' with the incalculable threats associated with new nuclear power stations. Many decisions over major risks do not involve a choice between safe and risky alterna-

tives, but one between different risky alternatives, and often a choice between alternatives whose risks concern qualitatively different dimensions which are scarcely commensurable. Current scientific and public discourses are rarely a match for such considerations. One source of temptation towards inadmissible simplifications is to represent the decision in question as one between safe and risky alternatives by playing down the imponderabilities of one's preferred proposal while simultaneously focusing on the hazardousness of the other risks.

1 Risk

Threat and insecurity have always been among the conditions of human existence; in a certain sense this was even more the case in the past than it is today. The threat to individuals and their families through illness and premature death and the threats to the community through famines and plagues were greater in the Middle Ages than today. From this kind of threat we must distinguish the *semantics of risk* associated since the beginning of the modern period with the increasing importance of decision, uncertainty and probability in the process of modernization. The semantics of risk refer to the present thematization of future threats that are often a product of the successes of civilization. It also makes possible new, post-utopian mobilizations of societies, for example, as we have seen, cosmopolitan initiatives against climate change and shifting alliances between civic movements, states and companies.

The two faces of risk – chance and danger – became an issue in the course of industrialization, starting with intercontinental merchant shipping. Risk represents the perceptual and cognitive schema in accordance with which a society mobilizes itself when it is confronted with the openness, uncertainties and obstructions of a self-created future and is no longer defined by religion, tradition or the superior power of nature but has even lost its faith in the redemptive powers of utopias.

As a gulf opened up between God and risk, the European novel entered into an association with risk. When risk appeared on the stage, God had to renounce his role as lord of the universe, with all the subversive consequences that this entailed. *The Art of the Novel* (Kundera 2003) revealed the many faces of risk in terms of its own logic and explored its existential dimension. In the figure of Don Quixote, human life, whose future no longer bows down before the power of the gods or before God's wisdom, has become a never-ending adventure. For, in God's absence, risk unfolds its fateful and terrible, inscrutable ambiguity. The world is not as it is; rather its existence and its future depend on *decisions*, decisions which play off positive and negative aspects against one another, which connect progress and decline and which, like all things human, are bearers of error, ignorance, hubris, the promise of control and, ultimately, even the seed of possible self-destruction.

Don Quixote, one of the first modern European novels, was completed with the appearance of the second part in 1616. The reaction of the sciences to the unforeseen was swift. The history of science dates the birth of the probability calculus, the first attempt to bring the unpredictable under control – developed in the correspondence between Pierre Fermat and Blaise Pascal – to the year 1651.

The horror of ambiguity which was a hallmark of the hazardousness – the ‘quixoticness’ – of risk from the beginning, can still be felt today; indeed, it is more present than ever with the cutting-edge technologies in which the greatest promise and the greatest calamity are inextricably fused. Not only Descartes, but also Cervantes, not only philosophy and natural science, but also the novelist, explores the ambivalences of risk modernity. If Descartes conceived of the ‘thinking ego’ as the foundation of everything, with risk the acting ego defies the gods and a predestined future, an attitude that can be correctly characterized as ‘heroic’ in Hegel’s sense. In the first modern novels, this heroism of risk is narrated as an awakening into an unknown world involving ever more unpredictability. At the beginning of Denis Diderot’s *Jacques le fataliste et son maître*, we come upon the two heroes under way – where they are coming from or where they are going to we have no idea. They live in a time without beginning or end, in a space without limits, amid social landscapes whose future seems as present as it is infinite. One senses that, given the indeterminateness of risk, existential experimentalism is unavoidable. The experiential dimension of risk – the discovery, the suffering, the prediction of the unpredictable, the fear, the desire, the surprise, the occasional anticipation of death, which risk smuggles into everyday life – all of this can be summarized in the (of course ironical and playful) assertion *I risk, therefore I am*. I venture, therefore I am. I suffer, therefore I am. Who am I? Why am I? Why am I the person who I am and not the person I could also be, and thus also am?

The category of risk opens up a world within and beyond the clear distinction between knowledge and non-knowing, truth and falsehood, good and evil. The single, undivided truth has fractured into hundreds of relative truths resulting from the proximity to and dismay over risk. This does not mean that risk annuls all forms of knowledge. Rather it amalgamates knowledge with non-knowing within the semantic horizon of probability. Thus the category of risk reflects the response to uncertainty, which nowadays often cannot be overcome by more knowledge but is instead a result of more knowledge. Sometimes this inability-to-know [*Nicht-Wissen-Können*] is suppressed, sometimes it becomes the centre of attention, the horror scenario which is great for business and for playing power games. Through risk, the arrogant assumption of controllability – but perhaps also the wisdom of uncertainty – can increase in influence.

The history of the novel and the history of the social sciences can be described, in parallel though contrasting ways, in terms of the historical

6 *Introduction*

metamorphosis of risk. In Balzac's novels the dominant factor is no longer the existential hazardousness of a precarious human condition forsaken by God. Here modern social institutions – the police, the administration of justice, the world of finance or the world of criminals, of the military, of state authority – take centre stage. Risk is explored in the institutional forms which foster domination, as later in the almost Kafkaesque rationalization theory of Max Weber and Michel Foucault's theory of power. Balzac's novels no longer have any place for lucky new beginnings. Society is founded and administered on the basis of the ambiguity of risk. The promise of happiness still outweighs the premonition of the possible disaster. Such a perspective reaches its culmination in Kafka. Here the freedom promised by risk has metamorphosed into its opposite, into self-obstruction, self-accusation and self-subjection in the face of the all-pervasive court and castle. The impenetrability, omnipresence and undecidability of systemic risks are foisted onto the individual.¹

Nowadays the semantics of risk is especially topical and important in the languages of technology, economics and the natural sciences and in that of politics. Those natural sciences (such as human genetics, reproductive medicine, nanotechnology, etc.) whose speed of development is overwhelming cultural imagination are most affected by the public dramatization of risks. The corresponding fears, which are directed to a (still) non-existent future, and hence are difficult for science to defuse, threaten to place restrictions on the freedom of research. Under certain conditions, politicians feel compelled to impose such restrictions because public discourses concerning risk take on a dynamic of their own (which remains to be studied). Risk is thus a 'mediating issue' in terms of which the division of labour between science, politics and the economy in highly innovative societies must ultimately be renegotiated.

2 Risk society

In risk societies, the consequences and successes of modernization become an issue with the speed and radicality of processes of modernization. A new dimension of risk emerges because the conditions for calculating and institutionally processing it break down in part. Under such conditions a new moral climate of politics develops in which cultural, and hence nationally varying, evaluations play a central role and arguments for and against real or possible consequences of technical and economic decisions are publicly conducted. In the process, the functions of science and technology also change. Over the past two centuries, the judgement of scientists has replaced tradition in Western societies. Paradoxically, however, the more science and technology permeate and transform life on a global scale, the less this expert authority is taken as a given. In discourses concerning risk, in which questions of

normative (self-)limitation also arise, the mass media, parliaments, social movements, governments, philosophers, lawyers, writers, etc., are winning the right to a say in decisions. The conflicts are leading to new forms of institutionalization and have even contributed to the emergence of a new field of law, risk law, which regulates responses to risks, above all those of scientific-technological provenance, and operates mainly at the level of administration, though already also increasingly at the level of research.

The struggle over blame and responsibility which is raging in social conflicts concerning the definition of risk, therefore, is not – as Mary Douglas (1966, 1986) asserts – an anthropological constant. Premodern threats also led to assignments of blame. Yet risks remained in essence ‘blows of fate’ that assaulted human beings from ‘outside’ and could be attributed to ‘external’ gods, demons or nature. The political history of the institutions of the developing modern society during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be understood as the conflict-ridden evolution of a system of rules for responding to industrial uncertainties and risks, hence those produced by decisions. That a ‘risk contract’ is a possible or necessary response to the adventure involved in opening up and conquering new markets and in developing and implementing new technologies is a social invention, an invention that goes back to the origins of intercontinental merchant shipping and that was extended to almost all social problem areas and gradually perfected with the emergence of national capitalism. Consequences that at first affect individuals become ‘risks’, that is, systemic, statistically describable and hence ‘calculable’ event types that can be subsumed under supra-individual compensation and avoidance rules.

This ‘risk calculus’ links the natural, technical and social sciences. It can be applied as much to highly diverse phenomena in public health – from the risk of smoking to the risk posed by nuclear power stations – as to economic risks, risks of unemployment, of traffic accidents, of ageing, and so forth. As François Ewald (1991) shows, by applying generalizable accident statistics and employing the exchange principle ‘money for damage’, the risk-insurance calculus makes it possible to institutionalize state promises of security in the face of an open, uncertain future.

Such a state-sanctioned risk contract involving precautions to curb the side effects and costs of industrial decisions and to ensure their ‘just’ distribution is situated somewhere between socialism and liberalism. For it recognizes the systemic origins of hazardous side effects while at the same time involving individuals in their compensation and prevention. Where this national risk contract is blatantly and systematically violated, the consensus which has sustained modernization at least in principle is open to challenge: this is the meaning of the category of *risk society*. It thematizes the process of problematizing the assumption that it is possible to control and compensate for industrially generated insecurities and dangers, an assumption which is central to the risk contract.² This means that the dynamic of risk society rests

less on the assumption that now and in future we must live in a world of unprecedented dangers; rather, we live in a world that has to make decisions concerning its future under the conditions of manufactured, self-inflicted insecurity. Among other things, the world can no longer control the dangers produced by modernity; to be more precise, the belief that modern society can control the dangers that it itself produces is collapsing – not because of its omissions and defeats but because of its *triumphs*. Climate change, for example, is a product of successful industrialization which systematically disregards its consequences for nature and humanity. The global economy is growing too quickly, affluence is rising too sharply, which simply means that the greenhouse emissions of the industrial countries are steadily increasing – by 2.4 per cent since 2000, to be precise. And it has become clear that, faced with this global challenge, single-state solutions are like Stone Age answers to the questions of the industrial age. The uncontrollable impacts of globalized financial flows for whole groups of countries, as suddenly transpired during the Asian crisis, are also an expression of the *radicalized* capitalist market principle which has cast off the fetters of national and supranational controls. Here political and institutional answers are still lacking.

The term *risk society* which I coined and made the title of my book in 1986 epitomizes an era of modern society that no longer merely casts off traditional ways of life but rather wrestles with the side effects of successful modernization – with precarious biographies and inscrutable threats that affect everybody and against which nobody can adequately insure. From this I drew a number of conclusions:

- Risk possesses the ‘destructive force of war’. The language of threat is infectious and transforms social inequality: social need is hierarchical, the new threat, by contrast, is democratic. It affects even the rich and powerful. The shocks are felt in all areas of society. Markets collapse, legal systems fail to register offences, governments become the targets of accusations while at the same time gaining new leeway for action.
- We are becoming members of a ‘global community of threats’. The threats are no longer the internal affairs of particular countries and a country cannot deal with the threats alone. A new conflict dynamic of social inequalities is emerging.
- Scientific progress now consists in subverting the role of experts. The fundamental principle of science and its visualization technologies – ‘I do not see any risk, therefore no risk exists’ – is being challenged. More science does not necessarily translate into less risk but makes the perception of risk more acute and risks themselves ‘collectively’ visible for the first time.
- Fear determines the attitude towards life. Security is displacing freedom and equality from the highest position on the scale of values. The result

is a tightening of laws, a seemingly rational ‘totalitarianism of defence against threats’.

- The ‘fear business’ will profit from the general loss of nerve. The suspicious and suspect citizen must be grateful when he is scanned, photographed, searched and interrogated ‘for his own safety’. Security is becoming a profitable public and private sector consumer good like water and electricity.

When I re-read *Risk Society* today, I find it touching. In spite of the dramatic tone, the world it describes is idyllic – it is still ‘terror free’. Yet many structural features described in *Risk Society* read today like descriptions of the world after 11 September 2001, after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

3 World risk society

In order to convey what is unfamiliar and novel about the category *world risk society* in contrast to that of *risk society*, here I will introduce and develop a whole series of conceptual innovations and differentiations – for example, the distinction between risk and catastrophe or between risk and culturally varying assessments of risk, whose importance is steadily increasing in the era of globalization. At the same time I will offer a typology of different ‘logics’ of global risks that makes it possible to define the new phenomena associated with transnational suicide terrorism (as compared with the national terrorism of struggles for independence or for political participation, such as that of the Irish or the Palestinians) and to compare it to environmental and economic global risks. Here I would like to mention by way of anticipation some of these conceptual innovations and the insights they open up.

Risk and catastrophe

Risk is *not* synonymous with catastrophe. Risk means the *anticipation* of the catastrophe. Risks concern the possibility of future occurrences and developments; they make present a state of the world that does not (yet) exist. Whereas every catastrophe is spatially, temporally and socially determined, the anticipation of catastrophe lacks any spatio-temporal or social concreteness. Thus the category of risk signifies the controversial reality of the possible, which must be demarcated from merely speculative possibility, on the one hand, and from the actual occurrence of the catastrophe, on the other. The moment risks become real, when a nuclear power station explodes or a terrorist attack occurs, they become catastrophes. Risks are always *future* events that *may* occur, that *threaten* us. But because this constant danger

shapes our expectations, lodges in our heads and guides our actions, it becomes a political force that transforms the world.

One of the key questions which this book poses and seeks to answer shines a spotlight on this difference between anticipated risk and the really occurring catastrophe. How is the presence of future catastrophes ‘manufactured’? Along what routes does risk acquire the predicate ‘real’ – in other words, how does it come to reign as ‘believed’ anticipation in people’s minds and in institutions and indeed often across the boundaries between nations, regions, religions and political parties and between rich and poor? And why does the anticipation of catastrophe, of all things, prompt a reinvention of the political?

The answer, reduced to a formula, is: global risk is the *staging of the reality* [*Realitätsinszenierung*] of global risk. That is one of the essential perspectives in which *World at Risk* goes beyond the theses of *Risk Society*. ‘Staging’ here is not intended in the colloquial sense of the deliberate falsification of reality by exaggerating ‘unreal’ risks. The distinction between risk as anticipated catastrophe and the actual catastrophe forces us instead to take the role of staging seriously. For only by imagining and staging world risk does the future catastrophe become present – often with the goal of averting it by influencing present decisions. Then the diagnosis of risk would be ‘a self-refuting prophecy’ – a prime example being the debate on climate change which is supposed to prevent climate change.³

The emphasis on the perspective of staging makes it possible to highlight an aspect of the global terrorist conflict that has been largely neglected until now. To exaggerate somewhat: it is not the terrorist act, but the global staging of the act and the political anticipations, actions and reactions in response to the staging which are destroying the Western institutions of freedom and democracy. The restrictions on individual liberties discernible at many levels – from the increase in surveillance cameras to restrictions on immigration – are not simply effects of actual catastrophes (for example, acts of terrorist violence). They are a result of such experiences *and their globalized anticipation*, in other words, of the attempt to prevent the future occurrence of such events anywhere in the world. Bin Laden and his networks achieve global political prominence only when a whole series of further conditions are fulfilled that enable them to achieve global public resonance and presence. Whether it be the mass media broadcasting the images of bloodstained victims across the world, or American President Bush declaring war on terrorism, or NATO declaring a case of legitimate defence after 9/11: only when such reactions follow the deed does every terrorist’s dream of a meteoric rise from obscure petty criminality to the ‘number one enemy’, the ‘global danger’ – in short, to ‘terrorist world stardom’ – become a reality.

Part of the success story of terrorism is that the US government, the European governments and the journalists working in the mass media have not yet grasped the importance of staging, i.e. how they unwittingly support