

SOCIAL THEORY OF FEAR TERROR, TORTURE, AND DEATH IN A POST-CAPITALIST WORLD

GEOFFREY R. SKOLL

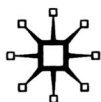


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To Jenny Peshut, light and love of my life forever and longer

Solitudinem faciunt pacem appellant.
They made desolation; they called it peace.

(Cornelius Tacitus, Agricola 30)

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Chapter I

Introduction

Ever since Thucydides justified his history by proclaiming the Peloponnesian War a great war and an epochal event for humanity, analysts of events occurring in their own time and place have risked accusations of hubris for similar claims. Nonetheless, the first years of the twenty-first century seem to portend epochal caesurae. The end of the half-millennium-old world capitalist system and the emerging dominance of a new form of communication and consciousness qualify these years as a time of a dramatic break with the past.

According to Immanuel Wallerstein (2004), the world capitalist system began at the start of the sixteenth century and was centered in Western Europe. It appears to have entered its death throes at the start of the twenty-first century. An even greater change involves the transformation of communication. Writing emerged as the dominant communicative form about two-and-a-half millennia ago, and printing about the same time as capitalism; together they formed a logocentric form of consciousness. Midway through the twentieth century, an iconocentric consciousness began to displace logocentrism. Logocentrism is a writing-based communicative form and iconocentrism is image based.

The chapters that follow concentrate on the United States as a principal site of these changes. The United States is and has been the vanguard for modern capitalism and the place where iconographic communication has developed exuberantly. This is not to say that other countries and regions do not participate in the changes, but the United States remains the pacesetter and the hegemon.

Systems of political economy and consciousness do not seamlessly succeed one another. Typically, an interregnum intervenes. During such interregna, chaos prevails. Among the characteristics of chaotic interregna are “wild fluctuations in all the institutional arenas. . . . The world-economy is subject to acute speculative pressures . . . [and a] high degree of violence is

erupting everywhere” (Wallerstein 2004:87). Most people adjust by relying on short-term adaptations using customary methods and strategies. Class conflict, as has been the case throughout recorded history, continues to prevail. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it takes the form of “the struggle between the spirit of Davos and the spirit of Porto Alegre” (88).

In the struggle over the system (or systems) that will succeed our existing world-system, the fundamental cleavage will be between those who wish to expand both liberties—that of the majority and that of the minorities—and those who seek to create a non-libertarian system under the guise of preferring either liberty of the majority or the liberty of minorities. In such a struggle, it becomes clear what the role of opacity is in the struggle. Opacity leads to confusion, and this favors the cause of those who wish to limit liberty (89).

Needless to say, the ruling classes of the current era favor the nonlibertarian solution. Furthermore, the role of opacity in obscuring communication along with analytic and strategic thought looms even larger because of the shift from logocentric consciousness to iconocentric consciousness.

While far from resolved, trends and developments in the first decade of the twenty-first century favor the nonlibertarian solution. Police state controls, pervasive surveillance, and mass incarceration grow apace in the United States. At the same time, the U.S. military spreads war, terror, and torture in a desperate attempt to maintain its elites and their influence over the rest of humanity.

The Risk Society

The Trinity explosion began the risk society on July 16, 1945, in the *Jornada del Muerto* (Journey of Death) desert near Alamogordo, New Mexico. It was the first test of the atomic bomb. Three weeks later, on August 6, 1945, the United States used another atomic bomb to destroy the city of Hiroshima, and three days after that, a third bomb blasted Nagasaki.

Ulrich Beck (1986) popularized the term “risk society” to describe a social shift from the past when the main hazards faced by humans came from the natural world. In the new social world, the main hazards are from human products. Beck proposed five principles of the risk society.

First, risks threaten systemic and irreversible harm. Most hazards, according to Beck, used to be personal, whereas in the risk society they are global. Furthermore, they are often beyond ordinary direct detection. For instance, in the case of nuclear explosives, much harm comes from invisible radiation. Beck gave the example of odors in medieval cities as

the old style risk: “[H]azards in those days assaulted the nose or the eyes and were thus perceptible to the senses, while the risks of civilization today typically *escape perception* and are localized in the sphere of *physical and chemical formulas*” (21). Beck’s bad history and bad science on this last point are addressed below.

The second of Beck’s principles refers to a boomerang effect of risks. Accordingly, those social strata that initially benefit from producing risks eventually turn back and threaten them (23). Genetically modified food might exemplify this proposition as the U.S. corporate leaders who profit from the products may one day find themselves eating the hazardous food they produce. This second principle also relates to the global character of modern risks, a communality of fear and insecurity (Van Brunshot, Gibbs, and Kennedy 2008:29).

Third, modern risks create a positive feedback loop in which risks create more risks. Modern risks are infinite and create infinite demands for reducing them (Beck 1986:23). Risk management has become profitable with the ever-expanding market.

Fourth, risk has become the arbiter of social stratification, replacing the old class and status system based on unequal distribution of scarce resources. In this view, danger, not scarcity, determines social position and relations. Moreover, knowledge of risks has become commodified, a commodity not everyone can afford, because so far as scientists do not recognize risks, they do not exist as social artifacts (Beck 1989:100). This means that scientific risk experts have a monopoly on defining what dangers society contains. Those who lack technical expertise must rely on those who have it, thus removing much of the critical discourse about risk from popular politics (1986:71–72).

Fifth, risk pervades public spaces. Private security measures have increasingly replaced public safety. This point relates to social stratification, as those lower in the social order must rely more on public space and public safety.

These five principles operate as propositions in Beck’s theory of risk. They ignore historical reality. Each one makes an invalid distinction between archaic kinds of risks and modern risks. Beck’s example of medieval odors neglects the fact that odors, though noxious, are not dangerous, whereas a good many serious health hazards provide no direct sensory evidence. Moreover, medieval hazards were no less systemic or global. The Black Death of the fourteenth century, which devastated Europe, came from Asia. The plague bacillus is not directly detectable, and even if it were, the public consensus did not have a germ theory of disease (Slack 1988). The Black Death tended to strike differentially—according to social stratification. The wealthy and mobile were more able to escape than impoverished masses

as recounted by Chaucer. Each of Beck's five propositions suffers from similar fatal weaknesses. Therefore, why did his risk society thesis gain so much intellectual purchase? The answer lies in his political economic theory.

Beck's political economic theory is anti-Marxist and neoliberal, with neoconservative implications. He revealed in his argument that the risk society "*set [people] free from the social forms of industrial society . . . just as during the Reformation people were 'released' from the secular rule of the Church into society*" (Beck 1986:87). He outlined his political economy in seven theses. First, welfare states of the West dissolved "class culture and consciousness, gender and family roles." This brought on "*a social surge of individualization*" (87); second, "ties to a social class recede mysteriously into the background. . . . Status-based social milieus and lifestyles . . . lose their luster"; third, "[t]his tendency to the 'classlessness' of social inequality appears as a textbook example in the distribution of mass unemployment" (88); fourth, "[t]he 'freeing' relative to status-like social classes is joined by a 'freeing' relative to *gender status*. . . . The spiral of individualization is thus taking hold *inside* the family"; fifth, "as industrial society triumphs, it has always promoted the dissolution of family morality, its gender fates, its taboos relative to marriage parenthood and sexuality, even the reunification of housework and wage labor" (89); sixth, "[t]he place of hereditary estates is no longer taken by social classes. . . . *The individual himself or herself becomes the reproduction unit of the social in the lifeworld*. . . . What the social is and does has to be involved with individual decisions"; seventh, and finally, individualization becomes "*a historically contradictory process of socialization . . . social movements and citizens' groups are formed in relation to modernization risks and risk situations*" (90).

In sum, Beck confused class and status, offering a bizarre mix of classical-political economic theory derived from Smith and Ricardo with a social phenomenology based on Husserl and Schutz. Beck offers a version of Francis Fukuyama's end of history thesis (1992), with its grounding in Alexander Kojève and Leo Strauss' neoconservatism (Derrida 1993). The popularity of Beck's concepts goes hand in hand with the neoliberal bent of the late twentieth century and its neoconservative culmination in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, the concept of risk has its utility in analyzing contemporary social trends. The British anthropologist Mary Douglas developed her concepts of risk about the same time as Beck, but with greater relevance to social reality.

Mary Douglas prefaced her 1992 collection of essays, *Risk and Blame*, by saying "The day anthropologists give up their attempt to ground meanings in politics and economics will be a sad day" (ix). In the modern contemporary world, "[w]e have disengaged dangers from politics and

ideology, and deal with them by the light of science" (4). As Douglas goes on to show, before we moderns in industrialized societies become blinded by complacency about our superior intellectual grasp, it would be well to examine how we, in fact, bend science to the same political and ideological uses as the taboo-thinking of people from other kinds of societies and other times. Different types of cultures offer three different kinds of explanations for misfortunes: the morality of the victim, the work of individual adversaries in the same society, and the work of outside enemies. The kind of explanation and a society's system of justice "are symptoms of the way the society is organized" (6). In complex, modern, industrialized societies, people use all three kinds of explanations, sometimes even for the same misfortune. Such societies are not governed by rational, scientific dedication to projects designed for the common good; occasionally a bit of such an orientation creeps into public policies. As Douglas pointed out, the taboo-thinking linking danger and morals did not come from lack of knowledge. "Knowledge always lacks. Ambiguity always lurks . . . there are always loopholes for reading the evidence right." Science has not banished the urge to dominate; industrialization has not deconstructed the rhetoric of fear and danger (9). The kinds of dangers identified and the people deemed dangerous reflect social structure and the values that sustain it. The elite always have right on their side; the marginalized are always to blame.

The reintroduction of the concept of risk may have to do with the revival of *laissez-faire* economics (Lowi 1990). The new meaning of risk, however, differed from the one prevailing when *laissez-faire* economic theory was new. Then, it meant great chance—the possibility of great gain or loss. Currently, in the sense developed by Beck, usage restricts it to hazard or danger. Meanings, especially of index concepts like "risk," change as the momentum of interlocutors shift with respect to the fulcrum of social change. These debates often pertain to investments in new technologies, decisions to invade, refuse immigration, or to license or withhold consent (Douglas 1992:24). The modern, Beckian concept of risk helps protect vested individualized interests in an individualistic culture such as that of the contemporary United States with its expansive capitalist enterprises (28). Along with risks comes blame. Lately, the blameworthy look like foreigners who hail from oil-rich territories coupled with marginalized, redundant minorities and impoverished Whites in U.S. urban and rural ghettos. Timothy McVeigh joins Jose Padilla, Willie Horton, and the Saudi hijackers of 9/11.

Moral Fears

Building on the seminal work of George Herbert Mead and Georg Simmel in the first decades of the twentieth century, some social scientists

developed an analytics that focuses on social transactions or interactions. Some of the best-known work coming from these interactionists pays special attention to deviance. Deviance refers to people and their acts falling outside of norms. Erving Goffman, in his study of social stigma, identified encounters between normals and deviants as constituting a “primal scene of sociology” (1963:13). It is primal because the encounter makes visible a founding moment of society; their mutual discomfort shows what most routine encounters obscure. Not knowing what another person might do makes every social encounter a potential danger, as in the incident when a distraught tenant shot at Georg Simmel as he approached a property he was managing for his uncle (Frisby 1992:103). A society’s moral system offers a general framework for evaluating other individuals, and its norms offer behavioral rules for social encounters. Violations of the rules create deviance, and those whom others perceive as engaging in the violation become deviants.

Critics of the interactionist approach say that it only provides micro-sociological accounts without connecting interpersonal, small groups to larger, macrosociological concepts. While much interactionist work focuses on microinteractions, its explanatory power connects with macrosociological processes. In her comparative examination of French and U.S. cities, Sophie Body-Gendrot argues for just such a link between quotidian life in urban settings and globalization. She relies on the concept of fractals or Mandelbrot sets, named after the mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot. As Body-Gendrot explains, fractal figures have parts that are the same shape as the whole but on a different scale. She claims that the fractal concept is more than just a metaphor; it defines a model for social organization. “It seems that our current societies are undergoing the same process of differentiation leading to continuous fractalization and to the same unbalance, ‘chaotic order,’ and constant readjustment” (Body-Gendrot 2000:21). The fractal model harks back to Simmel’s determination to found a sociology around the concept of social forms (Simmel 1950:40–57). In a similar manner, I argue that interactionist concepts are useful in helping explain the epochal change in social organization and the current chaotic interlude before new world systems emerge.

In his investigation of such deviants, or “outsiders,” Howard Becker observed that the legislation of rules does not fall from the sky; it is the work of what he propitiously called moral entrepreneurs. Their prototype is the crusading reformer (1973:147). Upon the institutionalization of new rules, rule enforcers police them (155). Becker’s structural analysis of deviance has borne fruit in case studies, such as Joseph Gusfield’s on temperance (1963) and drunk driving (1981) and Stephen Pfohl’s on child abuse (1977) to cite some of the better known ones. Studies of deviance,

or as Alexander Liazos (1972) sardonically remarked, “nuts, sluts, and perverts,” often abstracted the deviance process, and therefore neglected the context of social struggle. The kinds of people and milieus tend to be the detritus of profound, and often violent, social conflicts (Piven 1981), the walking wounded. As Becker pointed out in his original analysis, moral entrepreneurs, moral interpreters, and rule makers are not drawn from *hoi polloi*; they are, or represent, societies’ elites. Deviance is not conferred by just anyone, but by those who have the greatest stake in either keeping the status quo or sometimes moving it backward to a previous one. The better students of deviance recognized this fact all along. Deviance making is an exercise in social power, to keep it or get more of it. Stanley Cohen (1980) introduced the phrase “moral panics” to designate the construction of a moral state of emergency as part of elitist power strategies, which called for quick social rule making and rectification of class boundaries. Dario Melossi specified the historical sequence and class conflict context for such moral panics.

Melossi reinterpreted Rusche and Kirchheimer’s classic *Punishment and Social Structure* (1939) to account for U.S. criminal justice policies and practices since 1970. His thesis states that criminal justice becomes harsher when elites believe the working class is gaining political and economic strength. The elites respond as if this presented a moral crisis in society.

[L]abor insubordination tends to be interpreted by moral elites as an aspect of general moral malaise of society. . . . Agencies of social control . . . react to what they perceive as a moral crisis without necessarily being cognizant of the more immediate economic aspects of the crisis. . . . Therefore, following social situations during which elites see their hegemony challenged, two things tend to happen simultaneously, apparently linked only in the murky atmosphere of a “public mood”: people work harder for less money, and prisons fill beyond capacity.

(Melossi 1993:266)

Writing in 1993, Melossi limited his interpretation to the cycles of capitalism that go through periods of waxing and waning working-class strength. It is easy to expand his thesis. Instead of assuming the objectivity of a moral crisis, the morality crisis of the 1960s came from the elite’s reaction to working-class strength of the postwar period. The same pattern of harsher state controls can apply to the current crisis of capitalism; in this case, it is not so much the strength of the working class as the profitability squeeze. The elites create a moral crisis that takes several forms and replicates the three kinds of reactions to danger that Mary Douglas identified. First, outsiders, the impoverished, and economically dependent are blamed for their own moral failings. As Reaganism and Thatcherism

attacked welfare in the United States and Britain, in other countries, elites stirred up nativist reactions; second, while the welfare state shrunk, tending more toward a regulatory state (Braithwaite 2000; Rose 2000), redundant and dependent populations were demonized and dangerized (Lianos and Douglas 2000); third, terrorists became a new outside enemy. Terrorism replaced communism as the gravest threat to the capitalist world order. National moral panics and the moral crusades against a variety of deviants reflect the larger crisis of the world capitalist system.

Modern Capitalism and Its Crises

Modern capitalism is industrial capitalism. It originated with the industrial revolution and the national revolutions in America and France at the end of the eighteenth century. Chapter 2 briefly traces its history to its collapse in the twenty-first century. Marx's analyses of capitalism contain two features salient to current and future social trends. First, capitalism depends on continual change, like a shark that must keep moving lest it drown. The point is captured in the following extracts:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his, real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe.

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country.
(Marx and Engels 1848:207)

The second salient feature of capitalism is its falling rate of profit (Harvey 2005). The more the capitalist system functions over time, the smaller will