

CHAPTER 31

New Dimensions: The Growth of a Market in Fear

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Fear is one of the dominant emotions through which we imagine disaster. It also constitutes an important dimension of contemporary social reality. Public fear and anxiety play a crucial role in deliberations surrounding the environment, health, crime, children, new technologies, and recently and quite dramatically in relation to terrorism. Governments and public organizations often take the view that fear is a problem that they need to understand and manage. Today the discussion of public resilience in response to terrorism reflects this concern. Historically the imperative of maintaining public order and morale or concern about the outbreak of mass panic led governments to speculate about this problem with a view to containing it and minimizing its destructive effects. After the devastating experience of Hurricane Katrina, the problem of fear has also been “rediscovered” in relation to natural disasters.

But although fear is widely discussed in the public domain it is seldom studied by social scientists as a problem in its own right. The dimension of fear is rarely explored in contributions on the subject of how individuals and communities cope with acts of misfortune such as disasters. The study of fear has tended to be confined to the field of psychology, which is understandably interested in the emotional response of the individual to threatening circumstances (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Otherwise fear tends to be treated as self-evident phenomenon that requires little elaboration. However, the experience of fear has both a social and a historical dimension. Fear, like most emotions, is “fundamentally constituted” through social experience (Bourke, 2005, p. 8). So although the psychological perspective on emotion can often provide interesting insights, it also needs to engage with the wider cultural and social influences in order to develop an understanding of how fear is experienced. Scruton (1986, p. 9) introduced the concept of *sociophobics* “the study of human fear as these occur and are experienced in the context of socio-cultural systems” to point toward the territory for future research.

Fear is situational and is to some extent the product of social construction (Altheide, 2006, p. 24). It is constituted through the agency of the self in interaction with others. It also internalized through a cultural script that instructs people as to how to respond to threats to their security. That is why the specific features of the fear experience are most likely to be captured through an assessment of the influence of culture. Fear gains its meaning through the mode of interpretation offered by the narrative of culture. An orientation toward meaning and the rules and customs governing the display of fear can help take the discussion beyond the

stage of merely treating it as a self-evident emotion. One of the most perceptive studies of the history of emotions points to the need for distinguishing between the “collective emotional standards of a society” and subjective feeling of the individual (Lewis & Stearns, 1998, p. 7). Although the emotional experience of the individual is an important dimension of the problem, our attempt to conceptualize the current market in fear requires that we analyze the prevailing cultural narrative of fear. Cultural norms that shape the display and management of emotions influence the way that fear is experienced.

Experience shows that fear and the intensity with which it is felt is not directly proportional to the objective character of a specific threat. Adversity, acts of misfortune, threats to personal security do not directly produce fear. The human response to threat is associated with anxiety. But the conversion of anxiety into fear is mediated through cultural norms that inform people about what is expected of them when confronted with a disaster and how they should respond and feel. Hochschild, in her path-breaking study of the sociology of emotions characterizes, describes these informal expectations of what constitutes an appropriate emotional response to situations as **feeling rules** (Hochschild, 1983). These feeling rules influence behaviour in stressful circumstances and instruct us how and what we ought to fear. But the transformation of anxious responses into fears also requires the intervention of social actors, of fear entrepreneurs. The sociologist David Altheide argues that “fear does not just happen; it is socially constructed and then manipulated by those who seek to benefit” (Altheide, 2006, p. 24). While this formulation of the social construction of fear may inflate the role of self-interest, its emphasis on the role of human agency provides a useful counterpoint to the naturalistic and psychological representation of fear.

Fear is not simply a biological response to an event but a construction of the human imagination. My argument is that through a market in fear claim-makers attempt to convert everyday concerns and anxieties into tangible and imminent fears. But while fear entrepreneurs play a central role in the conversion of existential insecurity into fear, their activity cannot account for the impact of this emotion on the public and on society. These concerns are experienced and mediated through taken-for-granted meanings about the nature of social reality and in particular of personhood. C. Wright Mills has argued that people’s consciousness of being threatened is mediated through their system of values. Mills claimed that whether or not people feel well or insecure is influenced by their relationship with the prevailing sense of meaning. So “when people cherish some set of values and do not feel any threat to them, they experience *well-being*” (Mills, 1959, p. 11). In contrast, “when they cherish values but *do* feel them to be threatened, they experience a crisis.” “And if all their values seem involved they feel the total threat of panic,” adds Mills. Mills also projected a scenario that captures an important dimension of contemporary reality. “Suppose, finally they are unaware of any cherished values, but still are very much aware of a threat,” he states before concluding, “that is the experience of *uneasiness*, of anxiety, which, if it is total enough, becomes a deadly unspecified malaise” (Mills, 1959, p. 11).

Following Mill’s line of approach it becomes evident that it is not simply the threat to our security but our ability to make sense of it that influences the way we fear. Every community that is affected by a disaster is confronted with the task of making sense of the adversity that it has experienced. As Claude Gilbert argues, a disaster upsets the prevailing system of meaning. He notes that “we may speak of a disaster when actors in modern societies increasingly lose their capacity to define a situation that they see as serious or even worrying through traditional understandings and symbolic parameters.” And he adds that for a “community, disaster means the loss of key standpoints in common sense, and the difficulty of understanding reality through ordinary mental frameworks” (Gilbert, 1998, p. 17). It is the difficulty in recovering a common

meaning in the aftermath of an extraordinary experience that may account for some of the reports of community disorganization found in recent disaster literature. As Pastor notes, such episodes call into question “the ability of a culture to provide safety, meaning and esteem to its individual members” (Pastor, 2004, p. 619). My basic argument is that claims making intensifies and fuels a competitive market in fear when the prevailing system of meaning lacks the authority to make sense of acts of misfortune and disaster.

The growth of litigation and blaming in the aftermath of a disaster can be interpreted as an outcome of a decline in the authority of shared system of meaning. Our study of floods in England indicates that litigation and claims making activities is a product of the eighties. For example, in the aftermath of the floods of 1952 and 1953, claims making activities were conspicuously absent and blame assignment was muted and relatively restrained (Furedi, 2007). Drabek’s review of disasters in the United States draws a similar conclusion. Increasingly, “disaster victims engage in a blame assignment process,” he writes (Drabek, 1986, p. 201).

Competing claims framed through fear is not a phenomenon unique to current times. Ideological conflicts, for example, fear of nuclear weapons versus fear of communism, have often been conducted through attempting to convert people’s sense of disorientation into a clearly focused fear. But as I argue below projecting alternatives through the prism of fear is very different to the situation today. Fear has lost its specific focused quality. Claims making is not confined to competition between a small number of issues. The sense of foreboding toward a large variety of unspecific threats is linked to the absence of a reliable interpretative mechanism through which people can make sense of distressing events.

THE CONTEMPORARY CULTURE OF FEAR

Disasters and catastrophes have occurred throughout history. But the reaction to these events has varied according to the mood that prevails in society. A comparative study of human response to floods in Britain indicates significant differences in the way that disasters are processed. Destructive floods leading to serious loss of life in 1952 and 1953 were perceived through a very different cultural frame than the far less destructive flood of 2000. The cultural script transmitted to society in the 1950s signaled the expectation that communities and individuals would be able to cope with the calamity they encountered. Indeed people were encouraged to interpret disaster as a test or challenge to be overcome. In contrast, in 2000, the flood was represented as a uniquely threatening event that was likely to overwhelm the coping capacity of individuals. This difference in emphasis is highlighted by the following excerpts from the two scripts: A report from *The Times* on the Queen’s visit to the afflicted areas clearly transmitted officially sanctioned expectations that people would respond to the flood with “courage and fortitude.” It was reported that the Queen was “impressed by the stoic and heroic manner of the people who had obviously been through a bad and trying time, suffering heavy losses” (*Times*, February 4, 1953).

The familiar sounding rhetoric of the Queen was amplified and transmitted through metaphors and powerful symbols that at once affirmed the sense of loss while communicating the belief that Britain’s sturdy folk would prevail over the hardships it faced. In contrast, in 2000 newspapers transmitted the conviction that flood victims would suffer serious psychological damage. According to one account in *The Guardian*, “up to 20% of natural disaster victims may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.” It added that many feel depressed and isolated, losing their sense of place and attachment, or developing obsessive anxieties as a result of the ordeal” (Hirst, 2000).

These two contrasting representation of events were paralleled by a fundamentally different orientation toward claims making. In 1953 the floods were not politicized. Criticism of officials, public agencies, and professional groups was rarely expressed. A handful of politicians criticized the BBC for its inaccurate weather forecast. Claims makers promoting their own distinct agenda were conspicuous by their absence. The response to the flood of 2000 was totally different. From the outset, the project of blaming was vigorously promoted by claims makers. At various times, greedy property developers, the Environmental Agency, public planning officials, and politicians were blamed for the disaster (Furedi, 2007). Not surprisingly arguments about who to blame encouraged suspicion and mistrust in the aftermath of the floods of 2000.

The different evaluations and responses to the floods are in part linked to the significance and meaning attached to the role of informal networks of the community. If the floods of the 1950s were about a disaster inflicted on communities, those of 2000 are about individual distress. It is striking how in comparison to the disasters of the 1950s, the role of the community, with its altruism and resilience, is rarely endowed with significance in 2000. A review of the press indicates that reports of resilient behavior are virtually absent from the discussion. One of the few examples of community altruism was reported in the *Daily Mail*. Its report focused on a group of 22 people who were stranded in a pub in Yalding for 3 days. The owner of the pub was noted that “we were petrified, but it has been like the Dunkirk spirit.” According to this account everyone pitched in and provided help to one another. (Irwin, 2000).

It was the populist tabloid *The Sun* that attempted to resurrect the traditional narrative of the “British Bulldog Spirit” to represent the response to the flood. One of its writers noted that “as the nation comes to terms with the worst deluge in living memory, a small band of people leave us feeling proud to be British (Yates, 2000). But it was a “small band” of emergency workers and not the community that constituted the focus of *The Sun’s* celebration of British courage. In contrast, a study of the 1953 floods, observed that thousands of volunteers took part in the rescue and salvaging operations. “Many thousands of civilians, belonging to civil defence or voluntary organizations, played their part, and large drafts of officers and men were sent by the army and the R.A.F.” noted a report at the time (*The Times*, February 3, 1953).

In contrast to the representation of the flood in 2000, during the 1950s reports continually valorized the response of the community. Individual stories of human suffering were rare. In *The Times* there is only one story of an individual coping with adversity (*The Times*, February 6, 1953). At all levels of society, the informal community networks that emerged in the course of the disaster were seen as the heroes of the hour. For many flood victims, it was the response of neighbors and other community members that gave them the strength to cope with their perilous circumstances. Christopher Manser, a resident of Canvey Island who lost three of his siblings, recalls “the warmth generated by the spontaneous reaction of local people to the need for clothes.” He notes that “women had taken their husband’s jackets and trousers straight from the wardrobe without emptying pockets” and gave it to victims of the flood. “I found money, cigarettes, diaries, and so on,” he added (Pollard, 1978, p. 89). For scores of individuals a sense of community meant something positive. John Peddler, who was 17 when he rescued his father when the Lynmouth flood engulfed the post office, stated that “we are a very close community, and we remember the kindness of ordinary people who sent us things at the time.” He added, “that is how we coped” (*The Sunday Times*, August 31, 1997).

Ideas about how people are likely to cope in an emergency or a disaster are shaped by prior experience but also by a cultural narrative that creates a set of expectations and sensitizes people to some problems more than others. It provides a frame through which people understand and make sense of their experience. Twenty-first century Western culture frequently transmits the

view that we live in a uniquely dangerous era in which humanity faces hazards and potential disaster. “The modern era is often cast as an age of catastrophe, of global conflicts, genocides and ‘ethnic cleansings’, disasters of industrial and agrarian change and of technological hubris, and—increasingly—environmental cataclysms,” note two British historians (Gray & Oliver, 2001, p. 1).

There is also a manifest tendency toward expanding the range of events that can be characterized as a disaster to be feared. “These days, disasters may result in modest levels of harm, and perhaps relatively straightforward tasks for the emergency services” and yet still they are called ‘disasters,’” notes Tom Horlick-Jones (1995, p. 304). In line with contemporary crisis consciousness, often the line between misfortune, accidents, adversity, and disaster have become blurred. According to the philosopher Marcio Seligmann-Silva (2003, p. 143), the definition of catastrophe has altered. Instead of being represented as an “unusual, unique, unexpected event,” it is increasingly seen as an everyday event.

The process outlined by Seligmann-Silva has been conceptualized by social constructionist sociologists as that of *domain expansion*. Domain expansion—the process through which “the contents of previously accepted social problems expand”—is a constituent element in the construction of social problems today (Loseke, 1999, p. 82). Through the process of domain expansion, a heightened sense of anticipation surrounds the discussion of disasters in Britain. “Our recent history is littered with large scale disasters and catastrophes” is the first line of a book on the subject. Its author believes that the 1980s can be appropriately described as a “decade of disasters” in the United Kingdom (Newburn, 1993, p. 9). Another account writes of “the spate of disasters that hit Britain in the mid-late 1980s” (McLean & Johnes, 2000, p. 120). Its inference that we are living through uniquely dangerous times is testimony to a cultural imagination that perceives the world as uniquely risky. Horlick-Jones observed that the association of disasters in the United Kingdom with the 1980s may have served for many as a symbol of a “political and economic system in crisis” (Horlick-Jones, 1995, p. 307).

Ideas about disaster are culturally specific and are linked to wider attitudes about the meaning of misfortune, blame, and social expectations. It is our contention that contemporary disaster consciousness is not the direct product of a qualitative change in intensity of this threat. Rather, what have changed are attitudes to adversity and ideas about its impact on the individual. Whether or not a decade is associated with disasters is determined by a variety of influences. The scale of damage and the number of casualties may produce fear toward disasters in the future or it may not. Historical examples are quite useful in highlighting the influence of cultural norms on perceptions of adversity and hazards. It could be argued that if there was a decade of disaster in the United Kingdom in recent history, it would be the 1950s. In one year alone—1952—there were a larger number of casualties than in all the U.K. 1980s disasters put together. August 15, 1952 saw one of the worst flash floods ever to have occurred in Britain. It swept through the Devon village of Lynmouth, killing 35 people. Between September 4 and 9, the smog in London killed several hundred people. On October 8, three trains crashed in Harrow railway station, leading to 110 fatalities. And then the really big one: in December the Smog hit London, leading to an estimated 4000 deaths.

Yet, despite the mass scale of fatalities, these disasters were not represented as events that signified that the world had become a more dangerous place. Individuals who recall this event often note that back in 1952 the Smog was not interpreted as a disaster. According to one account, “I think it has to be realised that people thought that these disasters of smogs were the result of the industrialization of our country, and that they were a necessary evil which we had to put up with in order to get the benefits of our industry making us more wealthy” (Berridge & Taylor, 2003, p. 21). Jon Ayres recalls that as a youngster during the 1956 Smog, he and

his friends regarded it as “rather fun.” He noted that although the adults were worried “for us there was a real chance that school might be cancelled.” “It was rather exciting, you could play all sorts of games that young boys did with baddies round the next corner,” he recalls (Berridge & Taylor, 2003, pp. 17–18). From the standpoint of today’s cultural sensibility such a light-hearted reaction to a major episode of pollution would be unthinkable.

Throughout the 1950s, Britain suffered from a large number of air and rail crashes and mining disasters. Compared to reactions to adversity today, the response to them appears as almost casual. A sense of loss and fear was tempered by the conviction that the effects of these tragedies would be contained and soon overcome with little long-term damage. Despite the fact that far more people died in disasters in the 1950s than in the 1980s, the era was not characterized as a decade of disasters. The experience of disasters—major and minor—is a social phenomenon that is mediated through the public’s cultural imagination and attitudes toward loss.

SPECIFYING THE EXPERIENCE OF FEAR

The meaning and experience of fear is subject to cultural and historical modifications. The meaning a society attached to the fear of God or the fear of hell is not quite the same as the fear of pollution or of cancer. Matters are also complicated by the fact that the words and expressions used to describe fear are also culturally and historically specific. The language we use today represents fear through idioms that are unspecific, diffuse, and therapeutic. Bourke, in her important study of the cultural history of fear, points to the importance of the “conversion of fear into anxiety through the therapeutic revolution” today (Bourke, 2005, p. 191). Anxieties about being “at risk” or feeling “stressed” or “traumatized” or “vulnerable” indicate that an individualized therapeutic vocabulary influences our sensibility of fear. Conversion of fear into anxiety represents only one dimension of the process. The fear market also works in the opposite direction and converts anxiety into fear.

Our research suggests that the two distinctive features of today’s fear culture are:

1. The independent existence of fear as a problem in its own right.
2. The unstable, free-floating and raw character of fear.

Let’s look at each of these developments.

Fear as a Problem in Its Own Right

One of the distinguishing features of fear today is that it appears to have an independent existence. It is frequently cited as a problem that exists in its own right disassociated from any specific object. Classically societies associate fear with a clearly formulated threat—the fear of death or the fear of hunger. In such formulations, the threat was defined as the object of such fears. The problem was death, illness, or hunger. Today we frequently represent the act of fearing as a threat itself. A striking illustration of this development is the fear of crime. Today, it is conceptualized as a serious problem that is to some extent distinct from the problem of crime. As Garland (2001) observes; “fear of crime has come to be regarded as a problem in and of itself, quite distinct from actual crime and victimization, and distinctive policies have been developed that aim to reduce fear levels, rather than reduce crime” (Garland 2001, p. 10).

Frequently, public anxiety and concern are represented as a material factor that can have a significant impact on people's health. Contemporary medical culture contends that stress and fear are likely to increase the risk of heart disease, cancer, and chronic lung disease (Siegel, 2005). In the United Kingdom the conclusion of an enquiry held into alleged health effects from cell phones is now regarded as a model for how to respond to contemporary health fears—particularly related to environmental health. The Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones (IEGMP) set up “to keep ahead of public anxiety” concluded that there was no known health threat posed by mobile telephony. At the same time, the report stated that anxieties created by the simple presence of mobile phone masts need to be taken seriously since public fear by itself could lead to ill health. (Furedi, 2003, p. 4). There is always a potential for people's health anxiety to turn into a major problem. The medical sociologist Phil Strong writes of an “epidemic of suspicion” that can cause serious public health problems (Strong, 1990, p. 253). However it is only recently that risk perception itself has been represented as a “key component to causing fear” (Guzelian, 2004, p. 52).

With the autonomization of fear the issue is not simply its cause but the potential negative consequences of this emotion. This perspective often encourages the strategy of managing feelings of fear rather than the source of the problem. If people feel that their health is at risk, then this fear is often seen as a risk to people's well being (Furedi, 2004, p. 137). The legal system in the United States and the United Kingdom has also internalized this trend and there is a discernible tendency on the part of courts to compensate fear, even in the absence of a perceptible physical threat. As Guzelian noted, in the past “fright” i.e., a reaction to an actual event, was compensated whereas now the fear that something negative would happen is also seen as grounds for making a claim (Guzelian, 2004).

The autonomization of fear is associated with a growing tendency—to conceptualize risk as an independent variable. This approach is clearly formulated through the recently constructed concept of being *at risk*. The emergence of the “at risk” concept ruptures the traditional relationship between individual action and the probability of some hazard. To be at risk is no longer only about what you do or the probability of some hazard impacting on your life—it is also about who you are. It becomes a fixed attribute of the individual, like the size of a person's feet or hands. Being at risk also implies the autonomy of the dangers that people face. Those who are at risk face hazards that are independent of them. If risk is autonomous, it suggests that it exists independently of any act or individual. Like the Greek gods, risk factors exist in a world of their own. But unlike the gods whose acts conveyed a message with a meaning, the risk factors do not talk to us. Living with risk becomes our fate, encouraging a disposition toward a fatalistic perspective toward uncertainty. This sense of fatalism continually counsels us to avoid risks, to take measures that can promote safety. Underpinned by a sense of weak agency—the vulnerable subject—the development of a fatalistic perspective toward risk has fueled the development of a **fear market**. As the sociologist David Altheide (2002, p. 3) suggests, the prerequisite for the ascendancy of a market in fear is the emergence of fear as a “dominant public perspective.” Today, the frequently used idiom “politics of fear” expresses this trend” (Furedi, 2005).

The Unstable Free-Floating and Raw Character of Fear

How we react in general and how we fear in particular is subject to historical and cultural variations. Existing research highlights the importance of the historical dimension. Work by Stearns and Haggerty (1991) provides interesting insights into the changing way that fear in

relation to children has been conceptualized in the United States. They point out that with the passing of time children's engagement with fear was increasingly interpreted through the prism of terror. One consequence of this perception of childhood has been the tendency toward eliminating terror from children's books (Stearns & Haggerty, 1991, p. 85, 88). The other is to conceptualize children as "vulnerable" and therefore unlikely to be able to cope with adverse circumstances.

Equating fear with terror is one possible orientation toward a particular object of anxiety. However, historically fear does not always have negative connotations. The sixteenth century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes regarded fear as essential for the realization of the individual and of a civilized society (Robin, 2004). For Hobbes and others, fear constituted a dimension of a reasonable response to new events. Nor does fear always signify a negative emotional response. As David Parkin (1986) argues as late as the nineteenth century the sentiment of fear was frequently associated with an expression of "respect" and "reverence" or "veneration." From this standpoint the act of "fearing the Lord" could have connotations that were culturally valued and affirmed. In contrast, today the act of fearing God is far less consistent with cultural norms. One important reason for this shift is that fearing has tended to become disassociated from any positive attributes. This change in attitude is conceptualized by Parkin as a shift from a concept of fear that "encompassed that of respect" to what he calls "raw fear." The former is described as an "institutionally controlled fear" whereas "raw fear" has more of a free-floating and unpredictable character. (Parkin, 1986, pp. 158–159) Bourke claims that this shift toward more "nebulous anxiety states" is due to the decline of the tangible threats to corporeal existence that are occasioned by war (Bourke, 2005, p. 293).

"Respectful" and "raw" fear express very different relations to human experience. Parkin claims that respectful fear assumes "predictable response to behavior." It is a form of "knowable fear." It is knowable because it is embedded in informal taken-for-granted and culturally sanctioned formal relations. In contrast, "raw fear" has as its premise "an unpredictable aspect sustained by the victim" (Parkin, 1986, p. 159). This is a fear that is not rooted in folk culture and not guided by a generally accepted narrative of meaning, hence its unpredictability. The unpredictable character of fear points to its free-floating and dynamic character. Its volatility is enhanced by its unstable and unfocused trajectory. In contemporary times, fear migrates freely from one problem to the next without there being a necessity for causal or logical connection. When the Southern Baptist leader Reverend Jerry Vines declared that Mohammed was a "demon possessed paedophile" and that Allah led Muslims to terrorism in June 2002 he was simply taking advantage of the logical leaps permitted by the free-floating character of our fear narratives (Filler, 2003, p. 345). This arbitrary association of terrorism and pedophilia can have the effect of amplifying the fear of both. In the same way, constant claims that this or that hurricane, flood, and other natural disasters are symptoms of global warming has the effect of altering perceptions and fears.

Fear today has a free-floating dynamic and can attach itself to wide variety phenomena. The fear of terrorism illustrates this trend. Since September 11th, this fear floats into an ever-expanding territory. Deliberations on this subject have acquired a fantasy-like character. "Corporations must re-examine their definition of risk and take seriously the possibility of scenarios that only science fiction writers could have imagined possible one year ago" argues a leading economist (Hale, 2002). Fear floats into new territory because since 9/11 normal hazards can be turned into exceptional threats by associating them with the action of terrorists. As a result, we do not simply worry about the hazard posed by a nuclear power station; we also fear that it may turn into a terrorist target. The fact that an ever-expanding phenomenon

can be perceived as a target is less an outcome of an increase in the capabilities of terrorists than in the growth of competitive claims about what to fear.

The free-floating dynamic of fear is promoted by a culture that communicates hesitancy and anxiety toward uncertainty and continually anticipates the worse possible outcome. The culture that has been described as the culture of fear (Furedi, 1997) or as precautionary culture (Pieterman, 2001) encourages society to approach human experience as a potential risk to our safety. Consequently, every conceivable experience has been transformed into a risk to be managed. One leading criminologist, David Garland, writes of the “Rise of Risk”—the explosion in the growth of risk discourse and risk literature. He notes that little connects this literature other than the use of the word risk (Garland, 2003, p. 52). However, the very fact that risk is used to frame a variety of otherwise unconnected experiences reflects a taken-for-granted mood of uncertainty toward human experience. In contemporary society, little can be taken for granted other than an apprehensive response toward uncertainty. The French social theorist Francois Ewald believes that the ascendancy of this precautionary sensibility is underwritten by a cultural mood that assumes the uncertainty of causality between action and effect. This sensibility endows fear with a privileged status. Ewald suggests that the institutionalization of precaution “invites one to consider the worst hypothesis (defined as the “serious and irreversible” consequence) in any business decision.” The tendency to engage with uncertainty through the prism of fear and therefore anticipate the worst possible outcome can be understood as a **crisis of causality**.

The question of causation is inextricably bound up with the way communities attempt to make sense of acts of misfortune. The way people interpret such events—an accident or a catastrophe—is processed through the prevailing system of meaning. Questions like “was it God” or “was it nature” or “was it an act of human error” have important implications in how we understand acts of misfortune. Today such questions are complicated by the fact that Western societies possess a weak sense of shared meaning and therefore often lack a consensus about how to attribute blame and responsibility. The absence of consensus means that the link between cause and negative outcome is continually contested. Confusion about causation encourages speculation, rumors, and mistrust. As a result, events often appear as incomprehensible and beyond human control. The appearance of a loss of control is most clearly expressed through the conceptualization of being “at risk.” This new and original way of framing the relationship between everyday life and uncertainty endows fear with a distinct quality.

THE PROBLEM OF MEANING

The difficulty that society has in making sense of uncertainty is what gives contemporary fear its raw character. The distinction that Parkin made between the predictability of respectful fear and the uncontrolled character of raw fear can be understood as an expression of the growing tendency to contest the meaning of misfortune. Increasingly the questions of what we should fear and who to blame have become subjects of acrimonious debate. Lack of consensus over the meaning of misfortune bequeaths fearing a private, individuated, and even arbitrary character. Disagreement about the meaning of misfortune is not new. As Russell Dynes points out, the debate surrounding the meaning of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake led to a confrontation between rival views of the world (Dynes, 2000a). But past debates about the causes of disasters involved a clash of competing systems of meaning. Today, the protagonists in such a debate lack such

moral and intellectual support and engage in the controversy as isolated individuals. Instead of a consensus forged around a society's fear, the way we respond to threat tends to often isolate us. "Cancer and crime, pain and pollution: these fears isolate us," notes Bourke (2005, p. 293).

As Quarantelli noted, explanations about the cause of a disaster are subject to historical variation (Quarantelli, 1995a). In the absence of a master-narrative that endows misfortune with shared meaning, people's response to disaster has acquired an increasingly subjective and personalized character. The sense of loss of agency bound up with the state of being at risk means that people feel an intense sense of not being in control over their circumstances. Paradoxically, as we feel less in control the more we are likely to reject the idea that misfortune just happened by accident. At a time when apprehensions toward uncertainty intensify a quest for meaning it is difficult to accept that accidents just happen. As the Dutch sociologist Pieterman, argues there has been a shift "from a situation where the role of chance is seen as crucial to one where it is marginal" (Pieterman, 2001, p. 153).

So the crisis of causality does not mean that our culture discourages society from searching for the causes of misfortune. On the contrary, it has unleashed a ceaseless search for discovering meaning in misfortune and for attributing blame. The cultural mood of fatalism coexists with the belief that accidents do not just happen. There is always some one to blame. Ewald notes that "disasters are no longer, as before, attributed to God and providence, but to human agency" (Ewald, 2002, p. 282). The loss of a sense of causality has encouraged perceptions that associate negative and destructive episodes with intentional malevolent behavior. Such episodes are frequently blamed on the self-serving purposeful acts of politicians, public and business figures, doctors, and scientists—indeed all professionals. One of the most important way in which the sense of diminished subjectivity is experienced is the feeling that the individual is manipulated and influenced by hidden powerful forces—not just spin-doctors, subliminal advertising, and the media, but also powers that have no name. That is why we frequently attribute unexplained physical and psychological symptoms to unspecific forces caused by the food we eat, the water we drink, an extending variety of pollutants and substances transmitted by new technologies, and other invisible processes. The American academic Timothy Melley has characterized this response as agency panic. "Agency panic is intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy, the conviction that one's actions are being controlled by someone else or that one has been 'constructed' by powerful, external agents," writes Melley. The perception that one's behavior and actions are controlled by external agents is symptomatic of a heightened sense of fatalism that is associated with the sense of diminished subjectivity. The feeling of being subject to manipulation and external control—the very stuff of conspiracy theory—is a sensibility that is consistent with the perception "at risk." As Melley observed, this reaction "stems largely from a sense of diminished human agency, a feeling that individuals cannot effect meaningful social action and, in extreme cases, may not be able to control their own behaviour" (Melley, 2000).

A diminished capacity to share meaning endows the act of fearing with an atomized character. This may have implications for how disaster-struck communities cope with their loss. As we note elsewhere, the contemporary individuated narrative of fear may discourage the realization of the potential for a resilient response (Furedi, 2007). Fear that is unrestrained by communal norms tends to have a corrosive impact on community life. As one study of this process notes, an "epidemic of fear is also an epidemic of suspicion" (Strong, 1990, p. 253). Such suspicion tends to undermine social capital and solidarity—key requisites of community resilience in the face of disaster.

A MARKET IN FEAR

The absence of consensus about interpreting adversity encourages competitive claims making about the problems facing society. The consequence of such claims making activity is to convert underlying uncertainties and anxieties into more tangible fears. It also provides a medium through which claims for resources can be made. Claims making involves making statements about problems that deserve or ought to deserve the attention of society. A claim constitutes a warrant for recognition or some form of entitlement. Claims demanding that a newly discovered object of fear is taken seriously draw on prevailing assumptions about being at risk. As Joel Best, in his important analysis of claims-making reports, “how advocates describe a new social problem very much depends on how (they and their audiences—the public, the press, and policy-makers) are used to talking about, already familiar problems” (Best, 1999, p. 164). The narrative of fear provides the idiom for claims making activities. Although claimmakers are sometimes accused of scare mongering they are far more likely to gain authority through their demands that something should be done about the object of their fear. And with the steady expansion of campaigns demanding new assurances of safety the fear market has become a busy environment of competing claims.

There is nothing peculiarly novel about claim making activities based on fear. Throughout history, claim-makers have sought to focus people’s anxiety toward what they perceived to be the problem. However, the activities of fear entrepreneurs today do not represent simply a quantitative increase over the past. In the absence of a consensus over meaning competitive claims making is both extensive and intrudes into all aspects of life. As I argue elsewhere, fear now constitutes a distinct narrative that is culturally validated and encouraged (Furedi, 2005). As David Altheide remarked, the fear market has “spawned an extensive cottage industry that promotes new fears and an “army of social scientists and other intellectuals—or “issue fans”—serve as claims makers, marketing their target issues and agendas in various forums, such as self-help books, courses, research funds, and expertise” (Altheide, 2002, pp. 3–4). The trend outlined by Altheide constitutes a crucial dimension of claims-making. The promotion of fear represents a claim on moral authority and on resources. So when the British Geological Society demands that the danger of super-eruptions be recognized by officialdom, it also pleads for “investment in research to improve our understanding of regional and global impacts of major volcanic eruptions” (Report, 2005).

In the private sector, numerous industries have become devoted to promoting their business through the fear market. In some cases, entrepreneurs seek to scare the public into purchasing their products. Appeals to personal security constitute the point of departure for the marketing strategy of the insurance, personal security, and health industries. As Haggerty (2003) states, “personal security has become commodified.” He notes that fear is “frequently used to sell security products” and ads “help to channel and focus diffuse and amorphous anxieties about crime and other forms of social breakdown into distinct and personalized fears about someone entering *your* bedroom window, stealing *your* car, or attacking you on your evening jog” (Haggerty, 2003, pp. 194, 205). Fear is used by the IT industry and its army of consultants to sell goods and services.

In certain instances, it is difficult to clearly delineate the line that divides the fear economy from the promotion of anxiety and the anticipation of a disaster. It is worth recalling that for a considerable period of time the Y2K problem, also known as the Millennium bug was regarded as the harbinger of a major disaster. The scale of this major internationally coordinated effort and the massive expenditure of billions of dollars to deal with possible technologically induced crisis were unprecedented. Only a very small minority of IT experts were prepared to question

those devoted to constructing the “millennium bug problem” (Anderson, 1999). Even social scientists who usually make an effort to interrogate claims about an impending disaster failed to raise any questions about the threat. One IT industry commentator, Larry Seltzer, noted that “looking back on the scale of the exaggeration, I have to think that there was a lot of deception going on.” He added that the “motivation—mostly consulting fees—was all too obvious.” But nevertheless it was not simply about money. Seltzer believes that there were also a lot of “experienced people with no financial interest who deeply believed it was a real problem” (Seltzer, 2005).

Despite the growth of the Fear Economy and the exploitation of anxieties about potential catastrophes, the promotion of fear is primarily driven cultural concerns rather than financial expediency. One of the unfortunate consequences of the culture of fear is that any problem or new challenge is liable to be transformed into an issue of survival. So, instead of representing the need to overhaul and update our computer systems as a technical problem, contemporary culture preferred to revel in scaring itself about various doomsday scenarios. The millennium bug was the product of human imagination that symbolized society’s formidable capacity to scare itself.

Contemporary language reflects the tendency to transform problems and adverse events into questions of human survival. Terms such as “plague,” “epidemic,” and “syndrome” are used promiscuously to underline the precarious character of human existence. The word plague has acquired everyday usage. The number of times it has been cited in the U.K. press has increased phenomenally from 45 in 1990 to 2298 in 2000 (Furedi, 2002, p. xiii). The adoption of an apocalyptic vocabulary helps turn exceptional events into a normal risk. This process can be seen in the way that the fortunately very rare occurrence of child abduction has been transformed into a routine risk facing all children. In the same way, threats to human survival are increasingly represented as normal. Kumar (1995, p. 205) argues that the apocalyptic imagination has become almost banal and transmits a sense of “millennial belief without a sense of the future.”

The fear market thrives in an environment where society has internalized the belief that since people are too powerless to cope with the risks they face, it is continually confronted with the problem of survival. This mood of powerlessness has encouraged a market where different fears compete with one another in order to capture the public imagination. Since September 2001, claim-makers have sought to use the public’s fear of terrorism to promote their own interests. Politicians, business, advocacy organizations, and special interest groups have sought to further their own agendas by manipulating public anxiety about terror. All seem to take the view that they are more likely to gain a hearing if they pursue their arguments or claims through the prism of security. Businesses have systematically used concern with homeland security to win public subsidies and handouts. And paradoxically, the critics of big business use similar tactics—many environmentalist activists have started linking their traditional alarmist campaigns to the public’s fear of terror attacks.

So after 9/11, the Worldwatch Institute issued a statement entitled “The Bioterror in Your Burger,” which argued that although past attempts to clean up America’s food chain had “failed to inspire politicians,” a patriotic demand for homeland security could “finally lead to meaningful action.” The Detroit Project, a campaign started by liberal commentator Arianna Huffington and Americans for Fuel-Efficient Cars, links its campaign against sports utility vehicles (SUVs) with the war on terrorism, arguing that Americans need to “free ourselves from the nations and terrorists holding us hostage through our addiction to oil.” Some environmentalists argue that their program offer the most effective counterterrorist strategy of all. In an article for the online journal *OnEarth*, David Corn, the Washington-based editor of America’s

left-leaning weekly *The Nation*, claimed that “technologies long challenged by environmental advocates are potential sources of immense danger in an era of terrorism.” “Environmentalism will have to be an essential component of counter-terrorism,” he added. Those who are hostile to environmentalist campaigns are also happy to play the fear card. One critic of the environmentalist movement’s hostility to using DDT argues that after the tsunami the “next Asian plague” will be malaria (Johnson, 2005). And supporters of nuclear power claim that the best thing that can be done to minimize the damaging impact of global warming is to expand this industry.

In a similar vein, Hurricane Katrina has also been adopted by claim-makers to serve their preexisting agenda of promoting fear to advance their cause. For some advocacy groups this catastrophe serves as a warning of much more dangerous disasters to come through global warming. Others represent it as an indictment of greedy property developers while others blame the bankruptcy of the politicians who run central government. Some point the finger at “big bureaucracy” while others denounce the human sins that have provoked God to punish New Orleans.

In this chapter, the working of fear has been considered in relation to Western societies. Given the significant role of culture in the construction of fear, we need comparative research to give us insights into the global dimension of this subject. It is also far from clear what impact the operation of the fear market has on human behavior. Research needs to be oriented toward a fear-rich ecology to gain insights into the impact of competitive claims making on people’s behavior. While studies have pointed to patterns of risk-avoidance in distinct spheres such as crime and parenting (Furedi, 2002; Garland, 2001) we know very little about how people react and process alarmist claims-making in relation to potentially catastrophic events such as a terrorist dirty bomb, global warming or flu pandemic. This is an issue that must engage the energies of disaster researchers in the twenty-first century.