

RISK PERCEPTION AND RISK COMMUNICATION

Paper to be presented by Dr Bill Durodié on 4 November 2009 to the NTS-Asia National Convention 2009, Marina Mandarin Hotel, Singapore

APOCALYPSE NOW

The remit of Non-Traditional Security (NTS) studies has come of age. The end of the Cold War allowed the terrain of interest in international relations to shift from issues of national security – as previously determined by the great powers – to those labeled as human security – as largely promoted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or ‘*civil society*’ (1).

But this shift is not without its drawbacks (2). Maybe with a view to highlighting their causes, many promoters of NTS appear to be peculiarly beguiled by apocalyptic discourse. References to extinctions and epidemics, catastrophes and conflicts, abound. At international conferences, we are repeatedly reminded of our insecurities and vulnerabilities.

The world – it would seem – is always getting worse. And the source – as well as the victim – of these problems, is held to be abundantly clear – humanity itself.

Lest I too be accused of scaremongering, I cite Dr. Margaret Chan, director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO), who earlier this year, in raising the pandemic threat level from four to five in response to the outbreak of swine flu, asserted that “*it really is all of humanity that is under threat*” (3).

Intriguingly, when subsequently discussing the possibility of increasing the alert to the top of the WHO’s six-point scale, to thereby declare a full-blown pandemic, Dr. Chan advised that this would not mean “*that we are facing the end of the world*” – though this implied there were scenarios she envisaged that did (4).

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS

How we define and respond to a crisis is only partly dependent on its scale, or the agent causing it. Historically evolving cultural attitudes and outlooks have been shown to play a far greater role (5). This social element explains why it is that, at certain times and in specific circumstances, a widespread loss of life can fail to be a point of discussion, but in other situations relatively minor events may become key reference points.

Emergencies are acted upon differently according to what they represent to particular societies, irrespective of objective indicators, such as total cost or lives lost. The inability to make sense of threats, or draw positive conclusions from their existence, can be quite disarming. Our responses therefore, often teach us more about ourselves, than about the problems themselves. In their own turn, public perceptions of risk are – to a significant degree – shaped by the pronouncements and interpretations of elites and experts. Assumptions and allegiances develop over protracted periods of time, long before particular problems manifest themselves, and can determine outcomes. For instance, an absence of trust in the authorities – or in other human beings – will impact on the response to an emergency, irrespective of its specific contours.

MANILA EXPOSED

After the recent deluge brought about by tropical storm Ondoy (also known as typhoon Ketsana) to Manila, the capital of the Philippines, Dr. Nathaniel Cruz, head of the weather services bureau for the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA), announced that the flood that ensued was caused by historically record rainfall (6).

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

But without disputing the severity or extent of the problems that ensued, one can, and ought to, question the framing of matters in this way. Whether this relatively intense – but short-lived – downpour was really worse than that from any of the 63 typhoons that lasted over 10 – and as long as 18 – days of the 445 typhoons that struck the Philippines between 1902 and 1921, is a moot point (7).

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

The reasons for this are well-documented by Professor Greg Bankoff of the University of Auckland in New Zealand (8). The topography of Manila itself, situated between Manila Bay and a large inland lake, Laguna de Bay – whose water levels have risen due to silting-up – is hardly ideal.

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

DOMAIN EXPANSION

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

Writing in *The Straits Times* in the aftermath of these events – as well as a series of earthquakes across the South Pacific and Sumatra, and dust storms in Australia – senior writer, Andy Ho, pointed to the supposed evidence that these events could all be linked to global warming (9).

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

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

According to the American academic, Joel Best, “[*o*]nce a problem gains widespread recognition and acceptance, there is a tendency to piggyback new claims on to the old name, to expand the problem’s domain” (10). Another recent example has been the tendency by environmentalist groups to promote their long-standing opposition to nuclear power increasingly through reference to the contemporary fear of terrorist attacks.

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

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

Writing in the revised edition of his 1997 book ‘*Culture of Fear*’, the UK-based sociologist, Frank Furedi, noted how reference to the phrase “*at risk*” increased almost ten-fold in British broadsheet newspapers over the six-year period covering the end of the 1990s (11).

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

HUMANITARIANISM VERSUS HUMANISM

As previously noted, the end of the Cold War proved to be very destabilizing for Western elites. Some looked for new threats to focus on, from the ‘*war on drugs*’ to the ‘*war on terror*’. Others hoped that the period would usher in a new focus on humanitarian assistance.

The problem with all of these however, was that they were largely driven by a search for purpose and meaning within the West, rather than addressing the actual demand for solutions and development elsewhere.

At the time of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the French cultural theorist, Jean Baudrillard, sought to distinguish between two concepts.

“This is the difference between humanitarianism and humanism. The latter was a system of strong values, related to the concept of humankind, with its philosophy and its morals, and characteristic of a history in the making. Humanitarianism, on the other hand, is a system of weak values, linked to salvaging a threatened human species, and characteristic of an unraveling history” (12).

Another way of expressing this is to distinguish between solutions that are done *for* people, as opposed to those that are done *by* people. Outside intervention – no matter what its aims – comes associated with all-manner of presumptions and prejudices that rarely apply to the specifics of particular situations.

For instance, the dominant narrative on climate change is one that urges restraint in development and emphasizes human culpability in creating the problem. But what the poor need most may well be further growth and a heightened sense of their own agency in resolving things.

Ordinary people are always the real '*first-responders*' in any emergency. And disasters – whilst destroying physical and economic capital – also present a tremendous opportunity for the creation and enhancement of social capital – so long as the spontaneous need to exert and assume control is not subsumed to the agendas and presumptions of existing or external authorities.

Otherwise, the dominant cultural outlooks may come to the fore. It is then that the pessimistic views of social leaders and their responses begin to hold sway. These determine whether the focus is on resilience, reconstruction and the future, or on vulnerability, retribution and the past. Sadly, despite the variety of ways in which it is possible to interpret and respond to different emergencies, the onus today seems to be on gloomy, apocalyptic visions.

A VERY ASIAN SOLUTION

None of the preceding points are to suggest that there are no problems to be resolved in the world. However, the presentation of humanity as the cause of natural disasters, as well as being the vulnerable victims of them, is unlikely to help.

The history of human responses to disaster – including terrorist attacks – is actually quite heartening. People tend to be at their most cooperative and focused at such times. There are few instances of mass panic (13). Amidst the tales of devastation and woe from the recent earthquakes and floods, numerous individual and collective acts of bravery and sacrifice stand out, reminding us of the ordinary courage and conviction that are part of the human condition.

People often come together in an emergency in new and unexpected ways, using the experience to re-affirm social bonds and their collective humanity. Research reveals communities that were considered to be better off through having had to cope with adversity or a crisis (14). Rather than being psychologically scarred, it appears equally possible to be enhanced.

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

A very Asian concept – *balance* – could do with being applied to these circumstances, as well as the avoidance of apocalyptic language. History suggests it is simply not the case that things are continuously getting worse and that our technological arrogance is driving us all to the brink of disaster.

Indeed, far from human agency being the problem, it is rather its in-agency that has become manifest in recent years and at such times – as evidenced by both the governmental dithering and popular inaction at the time of hurricane Katrina in America. Far from holding back, it is time to move forwards.

Despite good intentions, humanitarianism has increasingly been reduced to interventionism, and all sense of humanity as both a progressive and vital force in our lives has been eviscerated with it. It is high-time we celebrated the *human* in humanitarianism and relegated those who would portray us as both the cause – and vulnerable victims – of our own hubris to the dustbin of history where they belong.

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FOOTNOTES

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- (12) Jean Baudrillard, *When the West Stands in for the Dead*, in Thomas Cushman and Stjepan G. Meštrović (eds.) *This Time We Knew: Western Responses to Genocide in Bosnia*, New York University Press, 1996
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