

Worst-case scenarios. By Cass R. Sunstein. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2007. 340pp. \$24.95. Index. ISBN 0 674 02510 5.

In his latest book, cheerily entitled *Worst-case scenarios*, Cass Sunstein, the Karl N. Llewellyn Distinguished Service Professor of Jurisprudence at the University of Chicago Law School, addresses the perennial problem of how societies should approach and deal with low-probability, high-consequence risks. His aim, he proposes, is to help us steer a course between the opposing perils of inaction and overreaction in the face of potentially catastrophic threats, such as those that may emerge from international terrorism or climate change.

For this, he introduces any readers who may have been away for the last decade to the, by-now highly fashionable, yet narrowly technical, discipline of risk management. I say this as an academic who teaches risk management. I have nothing against it *per se*. It is a useful tool. But it does not provide answers to the questions Sunstein sets out to address.

Rather, a bit like those who invoke 'the science' in determining decisions on certain issues nowadays, risk management has become an empirical smokescreen behind which many well-meaning experts hide to avoid confronting a fundamental truth. That is, that processes do not provide answers, only people do. And for them to do so, we need to engage them in that messy, currently unpopular and highly uncertain activity known as politics. After all, irrespective of what the numbers say—ignoring for a moment the sometimes dubious methods used to derive these, as outlined by Sunstein himself—it is still up to us whether we choose to take a risk, rather than seeking to avoid it. This moral choice is what makes us human, but what risk management seeks to avoid. What we choose on our own hardly matters—for our decisions to matter we need to be able to convince others about them, ideally a majority.

Of course, in an age when the majority have effectively disenfranchised themselves from the decision-making process, small minorities and even individuals can have disproportionate impacts upon society, by imposing their uninterrogated presumptions about the world upon us all. Hence former US Vice President Dick Cheney's 'one per cent' doctrine—that if there is a one per cent chance of something being true governments have to treat it as certain in their response—can shape the course of history. But that is a failure of political debate, not inaccurate risk management.

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Today, it has become quite common to hear senior, and presumably respected, security planners arguing to the effect that ‘*perception is reality*’. After all, following on from my argument above, if sufficient people believe something to be true, then the state may have little choice but to act as if it were so. But far from being insightful, this reveals the near-catastrophic isolation of the elites from society today. The lack of any attempt to engage on their part, other than by pandering to the most ill-informed populist prejudice, is what demarks the contemporary period from almost any other. The notion that elites are expected to lead, and accordingly shape, popular opinion appears to be quite alien to them.

It is this responsibility to shape the future, not by sinking into the pointless and puerile fears of the present, but by showing real purpose and resilience that reflects real authority and engenders the sense of trust our present-day, wannabe authorities so desperately crave. Ironically, Sunstein alludes to this when in an aside about his mother he confides that whenever he worried about things as a child, she would ask him reassuringly, ‘What’s the worst that could happen?’, noting how, ‘Her confidence was contagious’ (p. 18).

Today, it is the series of unquestioned fears examined by Sunstein that are contagious—fears that have been shaped through people’s sense of social isolation and concomitant insecurity. But above all, fears that have been allowed to grow through the reluctance of elites to question them, as well as their own lack of purpose. Now they suggest that the reason people have irrational fears is because they are not very good with numbers and need to learn some risk management. That’s a bit rich!

Usefully, Sunstein does at least remind his audience that there is little logic in precaution. The so-called ‘precautionary principle’ has been used variously to justify both action (in Iraq) and inaction (in science) alike. But choosing to act, or not to act, is still a decision, with as many uncertain or unknown consequences as whatever it is we are held to be warding against. His own views, that the US overreacted to the threat of terrorism but underestimates that posed by climate change, are just that—personal opinions. He would be far better off arguing for these on moral and political grounds—even if we choose to disagree with him—than hiding behind risk management, trusting in this to win the arguments for him.

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