





WELCOME

TO THE LAND OF

Heathrow Airport, Terminal 4. Rain. Starbucks. Muzak. Bing Bong tannoy announcements warning of the dangers of letting children play on the escalators or in the lifts. Big and very slow moving policemen with carefully cradled machine guns, walking up and down in pairs, chatting (possibly gossiping) to each other as they go. **Joss Stone plays from speakers, there are lots of not knowingly unattended suitcases, and Bill Dourdié, a man who lectures on risk, security and political culture, emerges smiling from Arrivals with a beaming smile and an overnight bag on casters trailing erratically behind him. “Would you like a coffee?” I ask. “Yes please,” he says. “I’ve just been to France.”**

The concept of risk is at the heart of your writing. Why is that?

I originally did a physics degree, and as I did I became interested in scientific policy making. It struck me that in many situations scientists were saying one thing and government officials were doing almost the reverse, and usually justifying their decisions on the grounds that you can never be too safe. I also did a lot of work mapping out debates about the safe use of mobile phones, Mad Cows Disease, genetically modified organisms and then, after 9-11, I became interested in applying those ideas to how society reacts to terrorism. It struck me that our responses could be more problematic in themselves than the actual threat of terror, just as our responses to these other fears had been mostly problematic.

Why is risk such a relevant topic today?

Many of the cultural trends that have shaped the climate we are now living in could have been identified before the end of the Cold War.

I think sensitivities to risk have become so prevalent because the social and political networks that people used to belong to have become fragmented. So in the past a person may have been a member of a political party or a trade union and part of a clear family network and neighbourhood. Politics would have been important. Most people voted, whereas the turn-out at the last general election was 60% and the mandate of the current Labour government is only about 25%. Young people are also less likely to vote today than older people and a lot of people vote against a party they don't want, rather than for what they do want. So there has been this process of political disengagement which was accelerated during the course of the 1980s. At the same time there has been a breakdown in what I would call informal social networks such as the family, out of hour's clubs and membership organisations which has meant that as a generation people live their lives more on their own today than at any time in modern history. And if you live on your own it's easier to be frightened.

Why don't people vote?

I would actually argue that it is not the quantity of the turn out that matters; it's the quality of the political engagement behind it. In a way it is easier to quantify turn out but it is much harder to actually put a finger on the quality of the debate. But you just need to go to a pub or club; nobody talks about political issues any more, and I actually think that when I was young people occasionally did.

What about Iraq?

In a few instances where there is something truly shocking, then there is an impulse to being engaged, but the odd thing about, say, the anti-war demonstrations in the run-up to Iraq is that whilst it did prompt the largest protests that Britain had seen, they had the least effect. Millions of people were mobilised for the anti-war demonstrations at the level of sentiment. There was no attempt to win political arguments with people in favour of the war. The anti-imperialist movements in the past opposed war for the consequences of war on the people it was going to affect, whereas the anti-Iraqi war movement was about the consequences of any war for us.

How much is the current culture related to the collapse of Left Right politics?

I think it is intimately connected. When Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979 she set about smashing the power of the unions, though Thatcher was able to achieve what she did because of the weakness of the unions own politics. The Left and the unions were already beginning to degenerate, having turned their backs on their own historical traditions, on optimism and on a belief in technical progress and the benefits of science.

Take that away and the Right fragments as it no longer has any intellectual project or enemy it can blame for its problems. The end result of this has been a form of politics that, because it had no ideological vision, has become increasingly managerial. The idea was, well, you know, we're not trying to push the world in a particular direction, the best we can do now is manage the circumstances.

That's also partly about losing control of the economics of society, isn't it? The markets have the power to bring down governments, as governments knew to their cost.

That's true, but I think big capital only takes over in a climate where there is a lack of vision. So I would put the driver back on to the demise of politics, which essentially allows economics to become more dominant. Gordon Brown's first move when he became Chancellor in 1997 was to get rid of the government's control over interest rates; a prime example of how politicians have released their hands from the levers of power. I never attribute anything to the individuals concerned, they are always a product of their time, so it's not a case of whether Gordon Brown is clever or stupid, it is the circumstances within which he exists and the parameters within which he operates. In the absence of political vision, your options become much narrower. So when you combine the kind of fragmentation that we all as individuals now suffer from, with politicians who have lost any sense of purpose and who feel insecure, it has to be said, because they are also ordinary people like us, one of the consequences is that they accidentally trip over the notion that regulating everything and protecting us from our fears is the way forward. They notice we are fearful of everything, that there is demand from below for security which the politicians, lacking any agenda of their own, are then happy to fulfil because it provides them with their missing agenda.

FEAR & DREAD

The Left always embraced science and technology because they understood that it was a challenge to those who hang on to power on the basis of tradition. The Left turned against science and technology during the twentieth century because they saw it as associated with American militarism. That led to the growth of cynicism towards science. As the Left gradually became more degenerate they looked to other allies they could join with and, oddly enough, they ended up embracing the environmental movement, which ironically comes from as far Right on the political spectrum as it is possible to get. Its origins lie in the romantic reactions to the French revolution, which in turn led to the creation of a kind of mythological idyll about rural life, personified by Wordsworth, who went from being a radical poet to hiding in the Lake District writing about daffodils. Finally, throughout that later part of the Twentieth Century the Soviet Union in collapsed because of the corruptions of Stalinism, so when these forces converged at the end of the 1980s it resulted in what Francis Fukuyama heralded as the failure of the Left as a project. What then happened was that the old Right woke up to a hangover, because for 50 years they had defined themselves in opposition to the Left, whereas suddenly it now had to stand on its own feet; something it had never historically achieved. The only thing that had brought individual entrepreneurs and capitalists together as a group - which in this country became known as the Conservative and Unionist Party - was the threat of organised labour.

You claim people are suspicious of experts. Why?

Through a series of crises and scandals in the 1980s people became more sceptical about experts, but the unfortunate thing is that they were encouraged to be that way by governments, by NGOs, and by other groups who, cynically, I think, played into peoples mistrust. I would be the first to admit with regard to scientific expertises that in the past scientists have been dismissive of public opinion and didactic in their prescriptions. I think it is a healthy thing there was a backlash against that, but I also think that the backlash went too far, partly because of the crisis of confidence of the experts themselves, and because science was coming under attack on a range of issues. So now we have an obsession that scientists should listen to the public and engage in dialogue. But this is as patronising as telling the public what it should believe, because if you simply adapt to public perceptions that is as patronising as dismissing such perceptions in the first place. I think it is very unfortunate that expertise has come under such challenges, but the irony is that it is the experts themselves who lack the courage to defend what they really think.

In the light of Chernobyl or Thalidomide, aren't people right to be suspicious of easy scientific promises of a better life?

Sure, though the interesting thing is that everybody always mentions Chernobyl and Thalidomide, precisely because those examples are so few and far between. I would certainly argue that politics and science should be kept as far apart as possible. >

► The irony is that the current demand to engage the public in scientific decision-making will have the effect of integrating the public, the scientific establishment and the political elite closer than ever before. For the political elite such integration is a great blame deflection mechanism for politicians that don't know what they believe. That is the true crisis today, because it is the elites who have no sense of mission or direction.

Why such a loss of direction now?

Because they feel that the positive missions of the past, whether of the Left or the Right, led to catastrophe. So, for example, whenever I argue that there is a crisis of weak leadership, for some reason I hear the words Hitler and Stalin. Strong leadership does not have to equate to Hitler or Stalin. I actually think that the history of the Twentieth Century, if one were to analyse it more rigorously, shows the reverse of catastrophe. It is the absence of rational enquiry, argumentative discourse and public engagement that leads to disaster.

You have written about Islamic terrorists being labelled as fundamentalists simply because they clearly believe in something.

I was actually at lunch, three years ago with a senior source in the security service, who said that we need to understand why a small number of Asian youths are attracted to fringe Islamic organisations, to which my answer was that what we really need to understand is why a small number of Asian youths, and some non-Asians, are not attracted to our society.

Do you think extremists have preyed upon Muslim anger at the Iraqi war?

We don't need Iraq to encourage people to make pointless, nihilistic gestures and that's partly a result of the growth of ethics over politics. Everything now is supposedly ethical and ethics is the opposite of politics. It is all about individuals believing something is wrong and then acting against it.

There is no need to convince everyone else about what is wrong because if that was the case then it would be a political project. So if you are Peter Melchett you might be convinced that it is ethically wrong to grow genetically modified crops, or, if you are an animal rights extremist you might liberate animals or attack scientists for the same reason. There is a spectrum now of people who feel no obligation to win an argument, they simply act because that alone is sufficient, a spectrum of opinion that stretches from the Green movement to al-Qaeda. In one way al-Qaeda are unique as a terrorist group because they rarely claim responsibility for any of their attacks. They still haven't properly claimed responsibility for September 11th, and nor do they declare a political programme of what it is they are seeking to achieve. We often impose that programme upon them and construct Bin Laden's agenda for him, which he then bounces back at us. But actually, Bin Laden is more western in his outlook than anyone likes to think; as most anti-western ideologies are. A lot of westerners find it difficult to get their head round Islam because they themselves don't believe in anything, so there is a tendency to imbue Islam with a sort of fanaticism because some Muslims pray five times a day, but you need to separate that from the people who plant bombs and create terror, many of whom have very little to do with Islam in the first place. If you look at the nineteen hijackers on 9-11, for instance, most were educated in western universities. So what is it that puts well educated, intelligent young men in a position to benefit from contemporary western society, into a position where they attack that society so violently?

British society simply refuses to wake up to what al-Qaeda represents, which is a criminal nihilism widely spread across our society.

But that is not a world view, is it? Free market capitalism may be perceived as wonderful because you can buy an MP3 player for twenty nine pounds, but by the same token people feel dislocated from the execution of power and guilty at the benefits that the system gives them, don't they?

I think you are right in that people feel dislocated from power. You are also right that we feel guilty, though I think there is something sad and mean-spirited about the culture we living in that we cannot enjoy the things that we have got and relax for a bit. There is this kind of encouragement to think about the problems that we create. I'm not saying that life is problem free, but I think that on the whole, even in the developing world, things are better than they were a century ago, people live longer and they have generally healthier, wealthier lives.

There is a problem over the lack of engagement with the downside of progress though, isn't there?

It's the confusion of ideas as well. There are plenty of problems to be resolved but in the absence of any political coherence what you have is people lashing out and when you get people lashing out they lash out in all sorts of directions. But of course to achieve real change you need to channel that energy into a single direction, and then you can achieve serious change. Sadly instead what you often get are attempts to change things that are in themselves counter-productive, so now people increasingly see success as selfish, ambition as arrogant and development as dangerous, though all these things are necessary to achieving real change. It beggars belief how the oppressed of the world will ever liberate themselves if we feel that coherently challenging things is dangerous because by elevating the danger of everything we undermine our capability to achieve change.

There is a dominant cultural mood today which is characterised in the current paralysing obsession with risk which allows our contemporary elites to justify what they do, and which stops everyone from transcending the existing social relations. So, just as with the current obsession with terror, people have become fixated with content; who the terrorists are and where they came from and so on, whereas it's more important to understand the social context within the terrorists operate; the state of our culture, why we seem to hate ourselves and whether the terrorists are an extreme manifestation of that.

And are they?

I really think they are. I think they are more logical than the rest of us; they take the logic of that self-loathing and guilt, and they use it against western society.

Do you think there are similarities between where Baader Meinhof went in West Germany in the 60s and 70s and what al-Qaeda is doing today?

I think there is a parallel with Baader Meinhof. You need to also bear in mind that Baader Meinhof emerged in Germany where the Green Movement was also dominant. The Greens first achieved electoral success in Germany in part because of the rejection of the old frameworks after the Second World War, and partly because of the growth of the precautionary principle.

I actually think there are more parallels with Baader Meinhof than with other terrorist groups of that period. If you look at the IRA or the PLO for example, both used terror as a means to achieving a broader political end whereas the similarity between Baader Meinhof and al-Qaeda is that for them terror is the end in itself.

Baader Meinhof effectively burnt itself out in West Germany. Could al-Qaeda go the same way?

Well, Faifal Devji in his book, *Landscapes of the Jihad*, argues, not that they will burn themselves out but that the form that al-Qaeda manifests itself as at the moment, which is in the form of extreme violence, might not be the form that it takes in the future. It might become something slightly different though still expressing the same nihilistic ethically obsessed outlook. Baader Meinhof burnt itself out because it was politically weak. I think it is more important however to understand why our perception of terror is so distorted and that's to do with our culture. It is precisely because we live in this dislocated, isolated atomised world that we no longer feel any connection with, or collective project, with one another. By obsessing with the terrorists rather than the crisis of vision around us we miss something because if we only fight the terrorists we will fail. What we need is a debate about what the important values, ideals and visions are for a good society. Everything we do should be informed by our aspiration for the future.

9-11 obviously had a huge impact at the time and its repercussions continue to be felt now. How much of that do you think this is down to it being such a powerful television event?

Obviously a lot, but it is important to understand that the cultural climate had already been attuned to media events prior to 9-11. We have become a society that prioritises images over insight, style over substance and form over content. But despite the image that was created by 9-11 one has to keep what happened in perspective.


During 9/11, 2,800 people died, about the same number that died at Bhopal in 1987. On the world historical scale, while it's obviously tragic for those involved and their families, it is not possible to destroy the world that way. The total cost of the re-building in New York and the compensations paid to the families affected accounted for less than 1% of American GDP in a single year. Enron and Worldcom cost a lot more. World systems, structures, individuals and institutions are a lot stronger than most people give credence for. You cannot destroy civilisation by bombing it from the outside. The way that you destroy civilisation is by corroding its values from within and we're doing that, not al-Qaeda; because we're the ones saying we must ban these people from saying things, push people into exile and introduce laws against incitement for terrorism.

Looking forward with regard to al-Qaeda terrorism and the way our governments respond to it, where will we be in five years time?

I believe that most of what we are doing at the moment is making things worse and I think things are going to get worse before they get better, partly because the elites haven't understood what the problem is.

Politically, what does the immediate future hold?

Both the Left and the Right are explicitly part of the current problem we face.

They have created a world full of fear, anxiety and caution and neither of them are a part of the solution. What that means is that any right thinking, ambitious young person has got to understand that if there is to be a solution to any of this it will have to involve them, which is an exciting prospect. The problem though is that most people who want to see change in the world are impetuous. They want to see that change soon because there are very pressing problems; but unless we're realistic we'll fail to see that this situation is going to take a long time to turn around and that process can only begin by the winning of a small constituency to the notion of what is wrong. 



Mr William Durodié:

Bill Durodié is Senior Lecturer in Risk and Corporate Security at Cranfield University. He was previously Director of the International Centre for Security Analysis, and Senior Research Fellow in the International Policy Institute, within the 5* Research Assessment Exercise rated War Studies Group of King's College London. His main research interest is into the causes and consequences of our contemporary consciousness of risk. He is also interested in examining the erosion of expertise, the demoralisation of élites, the limitations of risk management and the growing demand to engage the public in dialogue and decision-making in relation to science.

Durodié was educated at Imperial College, the London School of Economics, and New College Oxford. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts (FRSA), an Associate of the Royal College of Science (ARCS), a Member of the Society for Risk Analysis, and an Advisory Forum Member of the Scientific Alliance. His work has appeared in a wide range of publications, and he is regularly requested to provide expert commentary for television and radio broadcasts. Bill featured in the BAFTA award-winning BBC documentary series produced by Adam Curtis: *The Power Of Nightmares: The Rise of the Politics of Fear*.

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