

Sociological Aspects Of Risk And Resilience In Response To Acts Of Terrorism

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The first line of defence against terrorism is civilians. Their support prior to, and their reactions subsequent to any incident, are crucial. In this sense, our response to terrorist incidents as a society teaches us far more about ourselves than it does about the terrorists. Whilst terrorists may hope that emergencies and disasters may lead to a breakdown in social cohesion, such incidents are also one of the best indicators of the strength of pre-existing bonds across a community. At such times, societies that are together, pull together. Those that are apart, fall apart.

We know that social bonds have been severely eroded over the last decade or so. This is manifest at both the formal and informal societal levels. At the formal level, people in advanced Western societies are increasingly unlikely to participate in the political process. Electoral turnouts are at an all-time low across the globe and this effect is even more striking amongst the younger age groups. Even when people do vote, it is often on a negative basis - against an incumbent, rather than for a replacement. Nor are we as likely to be active, or even passive, members of political parties or trade unions in the same way that our forebears were.

At the informal level, the changes are even more striking. Many have commented on the growing pressures faced by communities, neighbourhoods and families. In his book on this theme, *'Bowling Alone'*, the American academic

Robert Putnam also pointed to the demise of informal clubs and associations. Meeting up with friends, occurs less frequently than previously too. This loss of what is sometimes called 'social capital' has occurred and been experienced within a generation. It has dramatic consequences.

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Not so long ago, for example, it was still possible to send children to school on their own on the assumption that other adults would act *in loco parentis* - chastising them if they were misbehaving and helping them if they were in trouble. In many urban centres today, such a straightforward social arrangement can no longer be taken for granted. None of us ever signed a contract saying that we would look after other people's children. It was simply an unstated and self-evident social good. Now, we can no longer assume it to hold. The extent to which once core social bonds have been displaced in a relatively short period of time is quite disturbing.

Being less connected, leaves people less corrected. It allows their subjective impression of reality to go unmediated

or unmoderated through membership of a wider group or association. Thus, personal obsessions can grow into all-consuming worldviews that are rarely open to reasoned interrogation or debate. In part, it is this that explains our recent proclivity to emphasise or exaggerate all of the so-called risks that are held to confront us. From BSE to GMOs; from mobile phones to MMR, all new developments are now viewed through the prism of a heightened consciousness of risk.

Yet, as the recent episode relating to the SARS virus shows, it is our own responses that can prove the most debilitating on occasion. Nor are our fears restricted to the realms of science and technology. Age-old activities and processes have been reinterpreted to fit our new sense of isolation and fear. School-bullying, sun-bathing and even sex have joined an ever-growing panoply of concerns, along with paedophilia, maverick GPs and child abduction.

We may well be more aware, but we are also easier to scare. Being more isolated as individuals leaves us more self-centred, as well as risk averse. In turn these reduce the likelihood of our acting for some greater common good and make us less resilient, both individually and as a society.

A major focus of research and activity since September the 11th 2001 has been on security and intelligence. In

addition, there has been a significant examination of the role, remit and readiness of so-called first-responders, or the emergency-services. Sociological, cultural and psychological analyses have been restricted to examining societies in the Middle-East, or the 'mind of the terrorist'. In this context, it is hardly surprising that it appears that the more we do, the more vulnerable many people seem to feel. This is because none of the solutions being proffered address our own social disengagement and isolation. They are also almost entirely technical and negative in character.

Technical fixes, if not easier, are certainly more comfortable for the authorities involved than addressing problems of cultural coherence. A cursory glance at the literature, or the talks delivered to any related conference, reveals a bewildering array of suggestions, including; more surveillance, better intelligence, new detection equipment, protective clothing, emergency vaccines, concrete blocks, computer models to predict behaviour and outcomes, and new structures of governance to enhance communication and ensure accountability.

In fact, deep down, we all know that real resilience is actually about attitude. It is a cultural outlook based upon a sense of confidence and purpose that says, 'I won't let them get me down'. We can have all the technology in the world at our disposal and the clearest, most transparent lines of accountability, but at the end of the day, if our mindset is not right, we're in trouble. Being electronically connected cannot compensate for being socially disconnected. The latter leaves us less clear and less wilful as a society. It is this asymmetry that terrorists exploit.

What's worse, there is a clear danger that technical fixes can become part of the problem rather than part of the solution. This is because at heart, they serve to undermine the very liberties our

societies once held up as unique and worth fighting for or defending. They also serve to make us more suspicious and mistrustful of one another, thereby pushing us further apart as individuals. Real resilience requires people to be brought together with a sense of common purpose. Further, despite believing firmly that we remain at greater threat from nature than from bioterrorism, for instance, many in the health sector are now having to tailor their requests for future funding from government to fit the new agenda. If such social leaders cannot hold the line, or be robust in expressing their views, it can only bode ill for resilience further down.

It is not the magnetism of Al Qa'ida we need to worry about, but the vacuum at the heart of our own society

It is also easier to be against something than to be for something. It appears easier to cohere society around a dystopian fear than around a progressive vision. It was easy, for example, to agree on getting rid of Sadaam, but far harder to know what to replace him with. Similarly, governments have found it simpler to introduce new laws against animal rights protestors or anti-abortionists, than to win a positive argument as to why society should be in favour of animal experimentation or abortion. Again, in Europe we hear much about the spectre of a so-called 'New Right', emanating from those in mainstream parties who seem unwilling or unable to clarify their own policies and positions. Thus, it seems easier in the aftermath of terrorist attacks to restrain or restrict activity, than to liberate or free-up social processes.

In a similar vein, it has been remarked that we need to understand why it is that

a small number of Asian youth appear to be attracted toward fringe Islamist organisations. The question that, in fact, needs to be asked, is why a small number of Asian youth, and some non-Asians besides, are not attracted to our own society? Surely it is we who hold the balance of power and attraction here? It is a huge indictment of our own societies that we are unable to provide young people with rules, structures, a sense of purpose and meaning, as well as ways of realising their ambitions, and that, as a result, they end up looking for this elsewhere, in whatever twisted and abbreviated form that may take. It is not the magnetism of Al Qa'ida we need to worry about, but the vacuum at the heart of our own society.

It was no doubt just such a sentiment that led a friend of the British journalist Alison Pearson, a columnist writing for the London-based Evening Standard, to remark recently that watching the reality TV programme 'Big Brother 4' made him feel like joining Al Qa'ida. At every level in our society, from politics through to culture and science, our leaders appear to be increasingly unwilling to lead and also to be lacking any sense of purpose other than to protect us. Ironically, the more we allow our attention to be distracted, and the more we allow social resources to be solely risk-focused, the more pronounced the risks become, and because we fail to expand our horizons and debate where we are heading.

In February 2003, the US State Department launched its own National Strategy for Countering Terrorism. This document indicated from the outset that the best form of defence is offence, prior to describing what it labelled as a 4-D strategy for combating terror. The 4-D's stand for 'defeat', 'deny', 'diminish' and 'defend'. What is remarkable about these is the limited outlook they project. It would appear that American policy in the war on terror is restricted to reacting to the assumed actions of others. This is

hardly the projection of a bold vision for the future that might win hearts and minds at home, let alone amongst potential terrorists.

Real resilience requires rather more clarity as to aims and purposes than we are currently witnessing. If we were to define resilience very roughly as somehow restoring the *status quo ante* prior to a severe shock upon society, or at least restoring the general direction in which we were heading, then the first task that needs to be fulfilled is achieving some sort of agreement across society as to where we are, and where exactly it is that we are heading.

Changing our culture is certainly a daunting task. It requires people in positions of authority to agree on a common

direction and win others to it. The reluctance to engage in this fundamentally political process and the clear preference to concentrate instead upon more technical goals leaves us profoundly ill-equipped for the future. It may also serve to make matters worse.

Bizarrely, few of the authorities concerned consider it to be their responsibility to lead in this matter. Nor do they believe such cultural change to be a realistic possibility. Yet, in the eventuality of a major civil emergency, they hope that the public will pay attention to the warnings they provide and alter their behaviour accordingly. By then it will be too late. ■

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Bill was educated at Imperial College, the LSE and New College Oxford. His research focuses on risk perception, as well as the extent to which precautionary institutional measures can drive concerns rather than assuage them. He is also interested in examining the demoralization of the élite and the erosion of expertise in contemporary society.