Risk and panic in late modernity: implications of the converging sites of social anxiety

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Risk and panic in late modernity: implications of the converging sites of social anxiety

ABSTRACT

Comparing moral panic with the potential catastrophes of the risk society, Sheldon Ungar contends that new sites of social anxiety emerging around nuclear, medical, environmental and chemical threats have thrown into relief many of the questions motivating moral panic research agendas. He argues that shifting sites of social anxiety necessitate a rethinking of theoretical, methodological and conceptual issues related to processes of social control, claims making and general perceptions of public safety. This paper charts an alternative trajectory, asserting that analytic priority rests not with an understanding of the implications of changing but converging sites of social anxiety. Concentrating on the converging sites of social anxiety in late modernity, the analysis forecasts a proliferation of moral panics as an exaggerated symptom of the heightened sense of uncertainty purported to accompany the ascendency of the risk society.

KEYWORDS: Risk society; moral panic; social anxiety; reflexivity; uncertainty; counter-modernity

The driving force in the class society can be summarized in the phrase: I am hungry! The movement set in motion by the risk society, on the other hand, is expressed in the statement: I am afraid! The commonality of anxiety takes the place of the commonality of need. The type of the risk society marks in this sense a social epoch in which solidarity from anxiety arises and becomes a political force. (Beck 1992: 49)

INTRODUCTION

Offering a critical discussion of the plight of moral panic in the late modern risk society, Ungar (2001) argues that new sites of social anxiety emerging around nuclear, chemical, environmental and medical threats

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have thrown into relief many of the questions motivating moral panic research. Drawing from the writings of Ulrich Beck, he conceptualizes the risk society in terms of changing sites of social anxiety which ‘. . . . have steadily gained greater prominence [compared to moral panics] and created their own issue-attention cycles’ (op. cit.: 273). Attempting to elucidate the purported differences between the two types of threats – exaggerated deviations germane to moral panics and the potential emergence of catastrophes in the risk society – Ungar privileges anxieties associated with the latter to assess the implications of the changing sites of social anxiety.

The thrust of Ungar’s analysis derives from his contention that the most significant sociological developments to accompany the ascendency of the risk society involve shifts in social control processes and the nature and targets of social reaction to fear. He explains that moral panics were largely contained in a discourse of safety, and the social construction of moral deviants served to affirm the boundaries of the normative social order through claims making activities of public guardians. The uncertain and unpredictable nature of risk society accidents, on the other hand, rupture the efficacy of reassuring claims to public safety and raise key questions ‘. . . of trust, expertise and authority, the fallibility of science, the nature of (once hidden) institutional practices, the threat of immobility and, ultimately, the affirmation of social order’ (op. cit.: 288). Added to which, as the catastrophic potential of new technologies has become increasingly subject to public censure (‘reflexive modernization’), the discursive mediation of institutional safety is being displaced by the ascension of a ‘post-market coping model’. What this signifies for Ungar is that the intractable scientific uncertainties of contemporary risk conditions have rendered the moral panic–social constructionism nexus antiquated in the context of the catastrophic potential of ‘real-world’ events.

This paper charts an alternative trajectory, asserting that analytic priority rests not with an understanding of the implications of changing but converging sites of social anxiety. It is argued that the heightened sense of risk consciousness commonly associated with the uncertainties of late modernity has given rise to a process of convergence, whereby discourses of risk have conjoined with discourses containing a strong moral dimension. Rather than counterposing the ‘rational’ bases of late modern anxieties to the constructed elements and conditions reminiscent of moral panics, it is maintained that a more fruitful analytic endeavour is to be found in interrogating the mixed/hybrid knowledge formats through which the category of risk has become moralized. In response to the contention that the production of contemporary risks has given rise to a post-market reflexive global politics, however, a wider treatment of the risk society theory is used to reveal how the affirmation of social order should be expected to play out on the quotidian front, situated in the realm of everyday living.

The purpose of the analysis, then, is three-fold. Concerned that Ungar has established a dangerous benchmark in the sociology of moral panic, the paper first challenges his endorsement of the ontology of
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contemporary risks. It is shown how his reliance on the constructs of scientific rationality and reflexive modernization culminate in a narrow conception of folk devils, claims making and general perceptions of public safety. This critique is used, secondly, to explicate how Ungar’s selective treatment of the risk society theory flows into an (inadvertent) alignment with Anthony Giddens’s conceptualization of social anxiety. This is revealed as problematic in that it leads to an over-socialized conception of individual choice, failing to consider seriously how people deal with contingency. Using Zygmunt Bauman’s work as a point of departure, the final portion of the paper demonstrates how, in sharp contrast to Ungar’s model, the affirmation of social order is situated in the realm of locality, forged through the production of everyday living. As the intangibility of contemporary anxieties are reduced to the level of personal safety, far from rendering moral panics obsolete, it is concluded that the emergence of the risk society presents fertile ground for moral panics.

MORAL PANIC VERSUS THE RISK SOCIETY

Conceptualizing the sociological domain carved out by three decades of moral panic research as the study of the sites and conventions of social anxiety and fear, Ungar begins by juxtaposing the types of issues traditionally associated with moral panics and the political potential of catastrophes bred in the risk society. The concept of moral panic traces its inception to Cohen’s groundbreaking analysis, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*.

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media . . . Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten . . . at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself. (Cohen 1972: 9)

For Cohen, every moral panic requires the delineation of a scapegoat or ‘folk devil’, an identifiable object onto which social fears and anxieties may be projected. As the personification of evil, he conceptualizes folk devils as susceptible to instant recognition as ‘unambiguously unfavorable symbols’ (op. cit.: 41) which are stripped of positive characteristics and endowed with pejorative evaluations. Cohen is clear in his study of the mods and rockers phenomenon of the 1960s, however, that moral panics come about through a complex chain of social interactions involving claims makers, moral guardians and the media, set in the context of socio-political change...
and an ensuing climate of ‘cultural ambiguity’. What this signifies for Cohen is that, although moral panics centre on a particular folk devil, the locus of the panic is not the object of its symbolic resonances, not the folk devil itself. Rather, folk devils serve as the ideological embodiment of deeper anxieties, perceived of as ‘a problem’ only in and through social definition and construction.

By contrast, anxieties subsumed under the concept of the risk society are purported to emanate more from an historical conjuncture rather than localized sites of social/moral disruption. According to Beck (1992), whereas the modernization process served to dissolve the structure of feudalism in the nineteenth century in the wake of the emergence of the industrial society, modernization is now dissolving the industrial society as we ascend ‘towards a new modernity’. Concomitantly, while the preoccupation of the early modern industrial society was centrally concerned with the production and distribution of ‘goods’ – wealth, income, education, etc. – the late modern risk society is principally consumed by the conflictual distribution and political [re]allocation of ‘bads’ – the industrial fall out and latent side effects produced in the period of early modernity. Hence, in contrast to the limited spatial and temporal threats intrinsic to moral panics, hazards confronting the risk society ‘... are revealed as irreversible threats to the life of plants, animals, and human beings’ (op. cit.: 13).

In Beck’s assessment, the proliferation of risks in late modernity gives rise to an acute awareness of monumental uncertainties and anxieties, as ‘... the unknown and unintended consequences [of modern industrial production] come to be a dominant force in history and society’ (op. cit.: 22). Simultaneously, society becomes an issue and problem for itself, precipitating a confrontational reflexivity and a ‘globalization of doubt’ concerning the degree of faith instilled in science and technology. Yet, this skepticism, captured by the notion of ‘reflexive modernization’, is inherently paradoxical. Although characterized by a new form of political and cultural relations whereby non-expert voices emerge to contest the uncertainties manufactured by the techno-scientific complex, oppositional parties’ dependence on techno-scientific knowledge remains two-fold: first, to understand and comprehend what degree of risk exists; and second, to understand what the risks are. In contrast to the standard path for moral panics, then, where folk devils are of a ‘“distinguishable social type”... whose visibility is the basis of his/ her expurgation’ (Hay 1996: 198), the delineation of ‘folk devils’ in the risk society is understood as a ‘foraging process’ involving the search for some liable party or parties (Ungar 2001: 281). Such a process unfolds in the context of actors struggling to come to terms with the tensions ensuant between the techno-scientific rationalities of the expert world and the social rationalities produced in the domain of everyday living.
SOCIAL VERSUS SCIENTIFIC RATIONALITY

Locating his argument in the conceptual imagery expatiated by Beck, Ungar contends that, while moral panic is linked to a social constructionist approach which places an explanatory premium on the exaggeration of the actual threat posed by some condition, episode, person or group of persons, risk society accidents are highly unpredictable and uncontrollable, essentially neutralizing the constructionist approach as an analytic strategy. Since the mid-1980s, Ungar explains, social anxieties have built up around a variety of new risks which are not only unpredictable and uncontrollable but ‘invisible’, carrying the potential for global catastrophe. The potentially catastrophic nature of the risk society, in turn, ‘... gives rise to a reflexive orientation, whereby new technologies are subject to increasing scientific scrutiny and public criticism’ (Ungar 2001: 273). In other words, the issues addressed by moral panic research primarily involve exaggerated representations of only a small number of temporal anxieties that are manipulated to subdue otherwise marginal and dispossessed populations. Risk society accidents, on the other hand, eschew the temporality of moral panics, ‘... characterized by a stream of emergencies and would-be emergencies’ (op. cit.: 276) which are confronted by reflexive social agents as institutional failings in a politically fomented public arena.

Ungar’s epistemology corresponds to a realist or materialist perspective, proponents of which not only endorse the view that the risks of late modernity stand as objective conditions of an unprecedented magnitude, but which presents ‘... an understanding of the human actor in which there is a linear relationship between knowledge of a risk, developing the attitude that one is at risk and adopting a practice to prevent the risk happening to oneself’ (Lupton 1999: 21). Whilst it is true that Ulrich Beck, as the main expositor of the risk society thesis, holds that the threats and dangers confronting populations around the globe are only too real, it is important to recognize that he demonstrates a significant degree of restraint concerning his endorsement of the ontological certainty of the until-recent invisible side effects of industrialization.

the end of latency has two sides, the risk itself and public perception of it. It is not clear whether it is the risks that have intensified, or our view of them. Both sides converge, condition each other, strengthen each other, and because risks are risks in knowledge, perceptions of risks and risks are not different things, but one in the same. (Beck 1992: 55)

In Beck’s view, the nature of the risks preponderant in late modernity are historically unprecedented in terms of their scope and trajectory, as well as their potentially explosive catastrophic consequences. Far from the conceptual foundations of a peremptory realism, however, Beck’s contributions are more accurately characterized as ‘weak social constructionism’: risks which represent objective hazards and dangers, amenable to rationalistic calculation and assessment, but which are additionally ‘... mediated,
perceived and responded to in particular ways via social, cultural and political processes' (Lupton 1999: 28). As he concedes,

Risks . . . induce systematic and often irreversible harm, generally remain invisible, are based on causal interpretations, and thus initially exist only in terms of the (scientific or anti-scientific) knowledge about them. They can thus be changed, magnified, dramatized or minimized within knowledge, and to that extent they are particularly open to social definition and construction. (Beck 1992: 22-3)

Ample empirical support for Beck’s contention is found in studies analysing divergent perceptions of risk across varied social groups. Investigating an Environmental Protection Agency health warning concerning the use of the pesticide ethyl dibromide (EDB), for instance, Sharlin (1987) analyses tensions between official scientific discourses and everyday public perceptions of risk. Examining regional US media reporting, he shows that variations in news coverage did much to abet anxieties over the harmful side effects of pesticides in the foodchain, despite the EPA’s official denial that such a threat existed. Fowlkes and Miller (1987) arrive at a similar conclusion in their study of the hazardous waste dump at Love Canal, New York. Revealing how reactions to the discovery that leachates had surfaced in a near-by landfill site led to deep community fractures, they show how residents dispersed along the lines of two identifiable groups – the risk ‘minimalists’ and the risk ‘maximalists’. And Ali (1999) concludes his study of the search for a landfill site in the city of Guelph, Ontario with the declaration that the search was mediated by competing technical claims which ‘. . . indicated that science in the public forum of the GLSP [Guelph Landfill Site Process] took the form of a reflexive (rule-altering) and not a simple linear (rule-directing) activity’ (op. cit.: 11). Thus, it follows from the invisible character of contemporary risks – that is, ‘. . . risks . . . which only come to consciousness in scientized thought’ (Beck 1992: 52) – that the processes and mechanisms involved in the ‘unveiling’ of risks to the wider public are neither able to achieve sociological focus independent of a constructionist approach, nor are they available for full elucidation by adopting a linear model of simple reflexivity.

Claims Making and Social Control

Seeking to corroborate his problematization of the social constructionist approach in the risk society, Ungar affirms that ‘. . . the roulette dynamics of risk society accidents are also at variance with the model of social control and folk devils used in moral panic research’ (Ungar 2001: 276). In moral panics, he contends, governing authorities channel existing social anxieties towards a specific target (folk devil) in a fairly direct fashion for the purpose of imposing a sense of moral order or social control on situations or events that are perceived to lack such a property. Successively, ‘. . . claims making, pertaining to moral panics, can derive more from a shift in moral
boundaries than either the objective standing of a condition or new evidence’ (op. cit.: 277). The unfolding of risk society accidents, Ungar contrasts, propel institutional actors confronted with the political aftermath of ‘catalytic real world catastrophes’ to distance themselves from the identified location(s) of institutional failings in an attempt to displace imputations of liability and blame.

With the risk society, issues tend to be warranted more by scientific findings or claims, with scientists, for all their public liabilities, playing a central role in the cast of claims makers. Given scientific uncertainties, the likelihood that the media’s attempt to strike an equilibrium will be greater for ‘factual’ than moral claims . . . and the chance that the powerful will find themselves targeted, a more equal balance of power between rival claims makers is anticipated with risk issues. (Ungar 2001: 277)

In other words, risk society issues have given rise to a reflexive process of confrontation/refutation, rendering all aspects of claims making more open to discussion and criticism and, by corollary, exposing the conceptual limitations of claims making in moral panic research.

A degree of caution is warranted. Recent innovations in the sociology of moral panic have not only called attention to the increasingly eclectic character of the mass, niche and micro media, but to the enhanced degree of social leverage exhibited by folk devils. In the most developed statement, McRobbie and Thornton (1995) argue that folk devils are less marginalized than they once were, not only finding their interests defended in the same mass media that castigates them, but additionally in their own niche and micro media. Whilst it is reasonable to argue that patterns of claims making tend to eschew a resolute ‘top-down’ model of social control in the development of risk society issues, as powerful actors often find themselves the targets of institutional failings, it is crucial to recognize that claims making activities and processes of social control are far from self-evident through the duration of the construction – and contestation – of moral panics.

In the Canadian context, such a pattern was revealed during the summer of 2000 when the public was inundated with media coverage focusing on what came to be narrated in the news media as the dangers and moral indignations associated with rave dance parties held in the city of Toronto. Following the deaths of three young adults who had allegedly ingested the designer drug Ecstasy while attending a rave, raves became an object of contestation and debate, as several city representatives initiated what culminated in a successful campaign to have raves banned from city-owned property. What was particularly striking about the effort to outlaw raves, however, was that the discursive formation(s) through which termination efforts were consolidated evaded a direct focus on the [moralized] leisure space of the rave, alternatively highlighting the risks and synthetic uncertainties associated with ecstasy abuse [at raves]. The latter was intertwined with the city’s adamant refusal to assume liability for future tragedies (Hier 2002).
The Ecstacy panic in Toronto exemplifies the convergence of the sites of social anxieties purported to reside within the risk society and with more traditional formulations of moral panic (a point recognized but not expounded by Ungar). As Jenkin’s (1999) explains, a great deal of anxiety surrounding synthetics such as Ecstacy stems from fact that they are manufactured scientific processes, drawing on fears concerning the fearsome potential of unchecked experiments. Not only did the risks and synthetic uncertainties constructed around Ecstacy-intake serve as a strategy to incite moral panic in this case, but as the weeks wore on a number of organizations representing Toronto’s rave communities emerged to subvert the discourses designed with the intention of characterizing Toronto’s rave communities as being ‘at risk’. They did so by amplifying and accentuating the risks associated with forcing raves into locations containing substandard facilities (running water, adequate ventilation, supervisory presence, etc.), finding their interests defended in the same media outlets that only weeks earlier had run a scrupulous campaign against them. In this regard, whereas a risk discourse was utilized with the intention of serving as a mechanism of social control by authorities to subdue ravers, the same discursive technique was subverted as a mechanism of resistance apropos a reflexive[rule-altering] confrontation, as blame itself became a moral technology.

It is, therefore, crucial to recognize that much of Ungar’s argument is contingent on what assumptions are made about the ‘reality’ of contemporary risks – at least a partial reflection of the theoretical slippage inherent in Beck’s work (see Cottle 1998). If risks are understood as objective conditions confronting contemporary societies, it is only in the realm of scientific rationality that the ‘invisibility’ of contemporary risks can be understood techno-scientifically along a theoretical plane through the ‘claims making’ activities of experts. Conversely, it is within the realm of social rationality that ‘risks’ become ‘visible’ as lay knowledge, and in this respect contemporary perceptions of risk necessitate understanding along an epistemological plane through social, political and cultural channels. In other words, processes of claims making in risk society issues should be understood to parallel claims making activities involved in moral panics in that they set the context for, but do not directly dictate what, the public perceives as a threat.

ANXIETY AND RISK IN LATE MODERNITY

Having reviewed Ungar’s treatment of the sociogenesis of moral panic versus the risk society, it is now necessary to explore in greater depth the constructs of anxiety and risk in late modernity. Whilst intuitively attractive, the invocation of ‘social anxiety’ as an explanatory technique capable of capturing the essence of the late modern experience should neither be accepted uncritically nor without pause. As is evidenced in Ungar’s analysis, the explanatory power of such an account rests on the a priori assumption
that, confronted with the objective, catastrophic conditions of the risk society, social actors adjust their thought patterns and behavioural routines according to a rationally calculated, collectively shared, sense of existential insecurity. That is to say, faced with the objective conditions of the now-prevalent manufactured uncertainties brought about through industrialization, individuals collectively enter into a state of ‘anxiety’ emanating from the catastrophic potential of the risk society. Understood in this manner, such an account contains the seed of its own demise, as it is bound to spiral into an over-socialized conception of individuals as mere ‘risk actors’ playing a predetermined role in a culturally prescribed risk-narrative.

Seeking to theorize more completely how ‘social’ explanation becomes ‘psychic’ reality, Hollway and Jefferson (1997) problematize ‘the missing subject’ in overly socialized conceptions of late modern living. They envision anxiety as a complex dimension of the human psyche rooted in the dynamic unconscious, which only secondarily assumes the form of historically and culturally specific, shared anxieties. Just as Freud (1974) understood anxiety as an omni-present condition of the human unconscious that ‘has no object’, Hollway and Jefferson conceive of anxiety as a universal dimension of the human psyche. Although manifesting differently across time, space and place, anxieties are understood to derive from a more deep-seated intersubjective human condition which is not etiologically social in the last instance.

Of particular importance is Hollway and Jefferson’s conceptual stipulation that social-psychological explanation must theorize the passage of risk discourses through individual psyches prior to achieving explanatory completeness. It is not that social anxiety as an explanatory concept is superfluous in their view, but rather that the analysis of anxiety and everyday responses to it requires consideration of the experiential forms of anxiety, in addition to the social conditions that serve to generate it. It is in this regard that Giddens (1990, 1991) explains the contours of late (or high) modernity as consisting of ambivalence and existential anxiety, characterized by the ‘distanciation’ of time and space and the ‘disembedding’ of social relations. Such an ambivalence, says Giddens, arises from the intersection of social events and social relations ‘at distance’ with local contextualities. That is, late modernity involves a radical realignment of how individuals ‘live in the world’ in the sense that time-space distanciation and the disembedding of social relations (i.e. ‘abstract systems’) renders human experience increasingly susceptible to the actions and agency of ‘absent others’.

Yet, anxiety in Giddens’s assessment does not emerge unilaterally from the mechanisms of distanciation and disembedding – that is to say, not directly from social change via globalization. Rather, Giddens understands anxiety as an existential feature of the human condition that must be understood in relation to the overall security system that individuals develop. Early in life, Giddens explains, infants forge a sense of ontological
security through the interpersonal organization of time and space. Through their ‘emotional acceptance of absence’, infants acquire a fundamental sense of trust based on the ‘existential anchorings’ of confidence and the expectation that caregivers, in their absence, will eventually return. The subsequent trust that infants vest in caregivers provides an ‘emotional inoculation’ against existential anxieties which transfers to expert systems later in life. Giddens argues that in the face of future threats or dangers, the ability to trust, developed in childhood, acts as a ‘protective cocoon’ permitting the continuity of routine daily functioning, relatively free of what would otherwise be debilitating anxieties. Considering that at any given time individuals could conceivably be overwhelmed by anxieties which are implied by ‘the very business of living’ (1991: 40), the protective cocoon acts to provide a sense of ‘unreality’, a relative feeling of invulnerability to the contingencies of the risk society.

Experiential Lifeworld Versus the Mediated World of Risk

Accepting that the distribution of contemporary existence falls along the dual axes of a distanced globality interlaced with the proximity of the local, Giddens declares that ‘[a]lthough everyone lives a local life, phenomenal worlds are for the most part truly global’ (1991: 187). Situated in the context of his wider theory of time-space distanciation, he contends that distant/global relations increasingly enter into, and influence, the everyday phenomenal worlds of social actors. Such an intrusion of the distant into the local is purported to disrupt familiar life patterns and give rise to a form of ‘life-politics’ (Giddens) or ‘sub-politics’ (Beck) which signifies a phenomenal attachment that individuals develop with global affairs through mediated experience(s). Giddens purports that the experience of individualization, set within the context of globalization, gives rise to a phenomenal attachment with distant others, culminating in a moral responsibility for solving planetary problems.

It is in this sense, then, that Giddens understands the functioning of risk discourses as socializing individual choice and positioning social actors in certain specific ways (cf. Lupton 1999) by ascribing predominant explanatory importance to the trust relations that actors develop with expert systems. But Tomlinson (1994) questions the extent to which people have an on-going, phenomenal experience with global affairs. Taking particular issue with Giddens’s claim that distant events have permeated the experiential lifeworld to the extent that remote influences may have become more familiar than proximate affairs, he insists on preserving the distinctions between distant/local and mediated/immediate experience. To be sure, Tomlinson contends, most people are aware of global affairs through their engagement with the mass media, but this form of mediation is encountered as a distinct mode of experience, separate from immediate experience and the contextuality of the familiar.
Phillips (2000) goes some distance to substantiate empirically Tomlinson's theoretical postulate in her study of how people understand, talk about and respond to ecological risks via the mass media. Arguing that a sense of individual/moral responsibility for global ecology arises from mass mediated relations, she demonstrates how this is held in check by the practical constraints of everyday life. As she explains, the mediated experience of ecological risks precipitates the formation of a hybrid subject, whereby people are positioned '...on the one hand, as individually responsible for ecological problems in general terms, but on the other hand, legitimates lack of participation in political action beyond a limited amount of political consumption' (op. cit.: 185). Echoing Bauman's (1991) sentiments that the privatization of ambivalence undermines political action by transforming [globally conscious] citizens into [passive] consumers, she argues that the formation of hybrid subjects creates a tension between ecological responsibility, consumerist ideology and the constraints of everyday living. This constraint, in turn, provides people with a means to justify a lack of participation beyond a limited degree of 'responsible consumption'. In consequence, Phillips contends that political consumption only provides people with a limited sense of agency in global political affairs, as they discursively differentiate eco-politics as a mediated public realm separate from the realm of everyday experiential reality. Such a distinction leads Phillips to conclude that individuals are shielded from a sense of blame or anxiety, not from trust relations embedded in expert systems, but from a sense of order or control achieved in the realm of everyday living through routinized patterns of responsible living.

Hence, implicit in the refutation of the socializing character of contemporary risks is the problematization of the mass media as a discursive space which functions to shape public discourse and popular consciousness of late modern conditions. Contrary to Beck and Giddens's view that 'detraditionalization' or 'individualization' facilitates the development of an alternative form of global politics in a truncated public sphere, Tomlinson and Phillips counter that the mediated experience of risk leaves individuals with only a weak sense of global unity. Rather than culminating in the formation of a kind of 'transnational citizenship' based on a concern for distant others, individualization is understood as socially atomizing, reflected in the discursive distinction people make between the mediated world of global risks and the experiential reality of everyday life. This is not to suggest, of course, that people are immune to the influence of mass mediated risk knowledge formats circumscribed largely by experts, but simply that peoples' perceptions of risk are situated within the context of routinized and normalized local order and the production and functioning of everyday living.
LOCALITY AND ORDER IN AN AGE OF CONTINGENCY

It follows from the foregoing discussion that, if anxieties continue to build up around the invisibility of risk, the production of order should be expected to play out on the quotidian front, situated in the immediate realm of everyday living. Given that individuals have no means available to them to determine the uncertainties which place them ‘at risk’, all aspects of life represent a potential source of anxiety. If, in the face of pervasive and yet unknown ‘threats’, we are witnessing not the resolute triumph of risk (i.e. probabilistic analyses) over uncertainty (cf. Reddy 1996) but the divisive character of the political distribution of risk, understanding how individuals (and groups) are dealing with indeterminacy is of foremost importance. Accordingly, this final section offers one explanation for how a sense of social order is forged and maintained in an age of contingency.

Community and Security

In light of their important differences, social theories of late modernity have generally agreed that the concept of risk serves as an epistemological resource which is regularly invoked to explain or account for manufactured uncertainty. In this sense, risk represents a discursive technique which implies faith in the controllability of social phenomena (cf. Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Douglas 1992; Reddy 1996; Hollway and Jefferson 1997). Not only has the concept of risk emerged to eclipse the notion of uncertainty as the primary monitoring mechanism of the unknown but, as Douglas (1992) has shown, risk has come to signify danger. For scholars of risk, the conflation of risk and danger stems largely from the perception that the consequences or side-effects of human actions are unknowable, and a heightened sense of ‘risk consciousness’ serves to normalize collective feelings of suspicion and fear (Furedi 1997). The latter creates the illusion that life’s contingencies are susceptible to human calculation and, ultimately, human control.

At the forefront of this body of knowledge is Bauman’s (1991) argument that one of the principal, though impossible, tasks that modernity sets for itself is the production of order and the quest to extinguish existential uncertainty. He suggests that order is dialectically structured in that the quest to impose order is always situated in a struggle against contingency. As a relentless attempt to minimize if not eradicate indeterminacy, ‘...the substance of modern politics, of modern intellect, of modern life, is the effort to exterminate ambivalence: an effort to define precisely – and to suppress or eliminate everything that could not or would not be precisely defined’ (Bauman 1991: 7, 8). In this sense, the production of order establishes the limits to incorporation; it comes together under the pretense of an inclusive community founded on the precepts of mutual understanding and common unity.

For Bauman (2001), however, it is important to recognize that, while the
prospect of community offers the promise of sameness and familiarity, homogeneity - the knowable and controllable, the attainment of community remains elusive precisely because of the ways in which community (security) is sought. As he explains, throughout modernity the quest to establish a sense of existential security - community - has come at the expense of the de-legitimation of the Other: the criminalized, racialized, gendered or stigmatized. Given that the contingencies of late modernity can neither be named nor fought against, existential insecurities find a tangible target in the pursuit of 'community' through the expurgation of the Other. It follows that, although the ‘communitarian’ aspect of community appears to social actors as antithetical to ‘the modern’, it is in actuality firmly immersed within the confines of modernity: divisive, exclusionary and protectionist. The outcome is that, far from delivering the existential comforts imagined to reside with a state of ‘community’, the ways in which community is pursued serves only to contribute to an extended range of uncertainty.

From Strangers to Enemies
To the extent that the pursuit of community rests on the premise of simplification, the attainment of community remains contingent on reducing the complexity and intangibility of late modern conditions to the discernible level of personal safety. It involves, as Simmel (1950) saw it, the production of the stranger: s/he who is brought into existence through various forms of sociation involving both proximity and distance, neither near nor far. The stranger is ‘one of us’, an element of the group itself, situated somewhere between familiarity and remoteness, but never close enough to fall within the established order of what is understood to constitute ‘sameness’. In this regard, the category of the stranger stands in opposition to the notion of community; the stranger represents the categorical incomprehensibility of ambivalence.

And still, such a conception of the stranger presupposes a relatively uncomplicated world, corresponding to what Beck (1998) terms ‘the constellation of simple [industrial] modernity’. Within the domain of simple modernity, the social construction of the stranger unfolds as a dialectical process of signification, situated between a majority ‘us’ and a minority ‘them’; ‘... “locals” have their place in the structure of the social order, from which “strangers” must be distinguished and excluded’ (Beck 1998: 134). Under conditions of reflexive modernity, Beck contravenes, the ‘ordering categories’ reminiscent of industrial society are changing (or have changed) byway of the tripartite influence of individualization, globalization and manufactured uncertainty.

Individualization . . . means that own-group identity becomes blurred. Globalization means, among other things, that the walls of distance break down and that strangers and strangeness are increasingly caught
in the horizon of one's own life. Manufactured uncertainty means
danger lurks everywhere and no one does anything about it. . . . It boils
down to a question of concern to all of society: the politicization of the
question of security. (Beck 1998: 133, 134)

In other words, as people continue to lose their unambiguous social
positions in a world where everyone is in a sense 'strange', collective iden-
tities become permeable and the barriers reminiscent of simple modernity
grow pale. The fall out is that people no longer feel obliged to develop ways
to deal with strangers per se, but rather various sorts of strangers are forced
to develop ways to deal with one another in a social environment where the
category of the stranger has become generalized.

Confronted with conditions of universal estrangement brought about
through advanced modernization, Beck (1997) concedes that the culmi-
nation of these processes may not lead to a reflection on modernity and its
consequences, but could alternatively assume the form of 'counter-
modernization'. In contrast to reflexive modernization, which contributes
to the erosion of traditional boundaries of identification and group defi-
nition, counter-modernization works to resurrect those pillars of
communal security. It does so, not through a regression to some natural
communal paradise (cf. Bauman 2001), but through a process of 're-
naturalization': a contentious effort to reconcile the 'old' and the 'new'
under the constructed guise of safety and security. Hence, as the 'other side
of modernity' it would be erroneousness to conceive of counter-
modernization/community/security in diametrical opposition to
modernity/contingency/insecurity. Rather, counter-modernization stands
as the cultivation or invention of a form of 'constructed certitude'.

if modernity appeals and fights with understanding, ratio, doubt, basis
and cause, counter-modernity plays on the keyboard of the orphaned
and dried-up emotions: hate, love, fear, mistrust, intoxication, sex and
instinct. Belonging is practised and exercised emotionally, lived in and
lived out. Certitude arises from and with the prevalence of a 'magic of
feelings' (to use a modern term), an emotional praxis that sweeps away
the trembling and hesitation of questioning and doubting with the
instinctive and reflex-like security of becoming effective and making
things effective in action. (Beck 1997: 65)

As an active and conscious component of modernity, counter-modernization
transforms modernity's questioning of doubt and uncertainty into trust
and certitude, simplifying as emotive that which is infinitely complex by the
very standards of modernity. The necessity therefore presents itself to
distinguish between the production of everyday stereotypes of the stranger
on the one hand, and enemy stereotypes on the other. In contrast to the
construction of the categorically incomprehensible 'cultural stranger',
enemy stereotypes are decisive temporal constructions which are under-
stood to present an immediate affront to both personal and group safety.
As the antithesis to 'security', the threat posed by 'the enemy' abolishes all individuality and lends itself to the construction of a defensive ascription under the guise of communal security. What this signifies for Beck (1998: 136) is that '. . . the models of perception and action in risk society are transferred to the risk of civilization'. Or, to put this contextually, as a general suspicion of anomie takes the place of the contingencies of the risk society, people will invariably be drawn to practices and discourses that offer the promise of social order and social control in the face of existential uncertainties (cf. Hollway and Jefferson 1997).

Perhaps no example elucidates the cultural construction of enemy stereotypes better than the heightened concern for, and hostile reaction to, undocumented migratory populations observed in Canada over the past few years. Following the arrival in 1999 of four boats carrying a total of 599 'illegal' migrants from the Fujian Province of China, for example, the Canadian news media, drawing predominantly on statements made by government officials and police representatives, very quickly and uncritically problematized the migrants' presence in the country within the discursive context of risk and, more precisely, risk avoidance. Over a period of approximately two months, news reporting overwhelmingly centered on highly idealized and often fabricated notions of racialized illegality, amplified migration patterns, health and criminal risks, all in an effort to amplify the uncertainties associated with the migrants' arrivals. Yet, as Hier and Greenberg (2002) demonstrate, critical news coverage on the migrants derived particular strength from a deeply entrenched, communal nostalgia for Euro-Canadian tradition and heritage in the face of a growing Chinese-Canadian population. That is to say, the migrants' arrivals served to tap into a reservoir of existing social uncertainty pertaining to whether Canadian national identity possesses sufficient resilience and adaptive capacity to withstand social transformation when confronted with an economically and geo-politically inhospitable future (cf. Husbands 1994).

Importantly, while appearing on the surface to be constructions of the state, enemy stereotypes must be understood to originate with, or emerge from, everyday cultural stereotypes of the stranger. As Beck explains, enemy stereotypes represent a form of 'bureaucratic stranger' which is brought into focus through the institutions of civil society. That is, the categorically decisive bureaucratic construction of the enemy emerges to replace the categorically incomprehensible cultural construction of the stranger, as discourses centering on cultural differences are transferred to safety discourses focusing on the 'risk factors' ingrained in enemy stereotypes. In the Canadian example, so powerful was the discourse constructed around the risks posed by the migrants' presence that the coverage, hinging on a narrative of personal safety, articulated a politics of security and a discursive interrogation of the legitimacy of the state's protective capacity (Hier and Greenberg 2002). Successively, the state responded by housing the migrants in a make-shift prison for nearly a year before deporting them, set against the backdrop of a national debate on the country's
immigration and refugee policies. In this regard, given that nothing can be done about mounting existential uncertainties arising from global contingencies, the state is able to draw on existing anxieties as ‘... cultural difference is energized into a discourse about enemy stereotypes intended to legitimize the construction and reinforcement of the preventative security and protective state’ (Beck 1998: 139).

Therefore, the presence of the enemy as the antithesis to security stimulates the pursuit of a sense of community - a subjectively unambiguous distinction between ‘self’ and ‘others’ - that precludes any spatial allowance for alternative identities. In turn, reducing the complexity and intangibility of existential insecurity to that of communal belonging satisfies two purposes. First, it confronts directly the individuating tendencies of late modernity, turning them into immediate matters of communal safety and collective security. Subsequently, and second, it affirms a sense of fleeting community in a world of generalized strangers, contributing to the consolidation of a sense of own-group identity. ‘Identity’ then emerges as the surrogate for ‘community’ as an ordering practice in late modernity, contributing to the tempering of the precariousness of ‘community’ (Bauman 2001). In a culture of suspicion and fear, characterized by an individuated, distanced, uncertain world, the context in which everyday cultural stereotypes of the stranger present themselves as ambivalent becomes increasingly more differentiated in the form of bureaucratic enemy stereotypes signifying risk factors to be avoided.

WITHER MORAL PANIC?

What, then, can be said for the fate of moral panic in a risk society? Recall from the passage which introduced this discussion that Beck forecasts a ‘commonality of anxiety’ that will give rise to a solitary politics in the face of global contingency. For Beck, this will come in the form of global solidarity based on the reflexive confrontation/refutation of modernity, cutting through traditional boundaries of social segmentation. As has been argued, however, such a projection should be received with caution, in that the commonality of anxiety - or rather the perception of risk - does draw people together, but it does so at the level of quotidian order. In this regard, Beck’s notion of counter-modernization, as a more specified form of reflexive modernization, offers greater analytic promise.

Counter-modernization as an analytic concept is particularly useful in that it allows for the fusion of two seemingly desperate issues: the need to impose order at the level of everyday life and the ordering practices of the state. Contrary to Ungar’s contention that the catastrophic potential of the risk society has rendered subsidiary the more mundane, locally situated, iterative disruptions in daily living, it is a more fruitful analytic endeavour to understand the politicization of risk as contributing to an extended level of disruptions in the routine functioning of everyday living which are
subsequently incorporated by the state under the pretense of ‘law and order’. For as Furedi (1997: 147–68) argues, set against the backdrop of a heightened sense of risk consciousness, ‘the new etiquette’ of caution, fear and danger has distanced itself from judgments about what is morally proper or acceptable, becoming transposed into discourses of safety, security and communal living. And yet, although the utilization of a risk calculus has arisen to transform many social problems into a set of risks and dangers, post-moral techniques and discourses of risk-management have ended up doing old moral regulation work (Moore and Valverde 2000). To put this succinctly, as anxieties endemic to the risk society converge with anxieties contained at the level of community, we should expect a proliferation of moral panics as an ordering practice in late modernity.

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NOTES

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