

# **Terror, Witchcraft and Risk**

**Pat Caplan**  
**Anthropology Department, Goldsmiths College London**

**Contact details:**  
**Anthropology Department, Goldsmiths College**  
**London SE14 6NW, UK**  
**Email [p.caplan@gold.ac.uk](mailto:p.caplan@gold.ac.uk)**

## **Terror, Witchcraft and Risk**

Pat Caplan, Anthropology Department, Goldsmiths College London

### **Preface**

This paper was written in the spring of 2004 for a seminar series at a South African university<sup>1</sup>. It was a moment in time when the war in Iraq had been declared officially over by the President of the United States, but when a War on Terror had been declared by both the US and UK governments. Since that time, events have moved fast: the Madrid train bombings, the growth of the insurgency in Iraq, an election in the UK which saw the Labour Party returned to power with a much reduced majority (largely attributed to discontent over the war), the bombings of July 2005 in London, to name but a few. The editors of AnthroGlobe could have asked me to ‘update’ my paper but they did not do so, wisely in my view. All publications should be read in the context of their time and place, and any publication which seeks to deal with current events risks being out of date between completion and printing. So I have not attempted to ‘update’ the paper - to do so would have required another one.

### **1. Introduction:**

In a recent paper, Ulf Hannerz (2003) quotes Friedman’s identification of the ‘one big thing’ which characterizes a genre of 1990s writing: macro-scenarios for the world in the post-Cold War era. Hannerz locates these narratives, in which he includes Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilizations’ (1996) and Fukuyama’s ‘The End of History and the Last Man’ (1992)<sup>2</sup> as being on the borderlands between journalism and academia. He points out that what these writings have in common is a desire to influence political and public debate. This is very different from what the majority of anthropologists do, which gets little attention from the wider public or the politicians. Anthropologists themselves have been very chary of operating at the macro-level; we are happiest down on the ground, in communities with which we are personally familiar. Yet if we do not have any useful to say about ‘big questions’, other than via small answers, how relevant can we be in today’s world? (Gledhill 2000). One of today’s ‘big questions’ which I want to address in this paper is the ‘war on terror’.

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally given in the ‘New Social Formations’ seminar series, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, April 2004.

<sup>2</sup> He also includes Robert Kaplan 1996, 2000, Friedman’s own 1999 book, and Paul Kennedy 1993.

Hannerz notes, not for the first time, that an earlier generation of anthropologists was less squeamish about sticking their necks out (and risking criticism from colleagues) by becoming involved in public debates. He quotes a 1977 paper by Edmund Leach ('Custom, law and terrorist violence'), which was given, like his own paper, as a Munro lecture in Edinburgh. Leach's Munro lecture was an attempt 'to show the relevance of anthropological analysis to current affairs' (p. 169), and he ended his paper with the following comment:

However incomprehensible the acts of terrorism may seem to be, our judges, our policemen and our politicians must never be allowed to forget that terrorism is an activity of fellow human beings and *not* of dog-headed cannibals.

Leach's list of then-current 'terrorists' included the Baader-Meinhof gang, the Manson Family, South Moluccans, the IRA and Palestinians. A list constructed today would have only some similarities.

The second issue I want to address is that of witchcraft. I had begun to think about this issue in relation to Africa, mainly because, during a visit in 2002, I had encountered a movement of witch-finders on Mafia Island, the area of Tanzania where I have regularly carried out research since 1965. Subsequently I discovered (somewhat belatedly) that many anthropologists working in very diverse areas of Africa have had similar experiences, perhaps rather to their surprise, and they too have written about witchcraft and modernity<sup>3</sup>. One of the questions this literature has raised in my mind is the extent to which this phenomenon is specific to Africa, a question which chimes with recent concerns about the representation of Africa and Africans by outsiders, and particularly the extent to which Africa is represented in the west as 'the other' par excellence. To what extent can we discern similar 'occult economies' outside of Africa?

In an earlier paper (Caplan 2002), written a few months after September 11<sup>th</sup> for an anthropological conference on Social Justice<sup>4</sup>, I discussed some of the ways in which anthropologists had responded to that event and some of the ways in which anthropologists can address such issues, including

---

<sup>3</sup> (See Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, Geschiere 1997, Niehaus 2001 and the contributors to collections edited by Abrams 1994 and Moore and Sanders 2001).

<sup>4</sup> This was a keynote lecture for the annual conference of CASCA (the Canadian Anthropology Society) in 2002. A panel at that same conference consisted of anthropological work around the events and aftermath of 9/11 by a number of doctoral students in New York. Several of the papers were subsequently published in *Critique of Anthropology* vol. 24, no. 1.

- looking at ourselves, as well as or even rather than ‘the other’, or even bringing together ourselves and the other.
- using contextualisation
- making connections between phenomena which at first sight are not connected

In this paper, however, I want to focus instead on some of the western responses to September 11th, particularly on what is usually called ‘the war on terror’ and see what anthropological tools we might bring to bear. I propose to use comparison, an old and sometimes discredited anthropological technique, which here I prefer to think of as *juxtaposition*, and deploy two well-honed anthropological tools, both of which Mary Douglas has suggested are ‘forensic’: witchcraft and risk perception (Douglas 1992).

I will begin this paper by discussing some manifestations of ‘the War on Terror’, with particular reference to the USA and the UK. In the next section, I talk first about witchcraft in Africa, and some of the reasons anthropologists have adduced for its recent increased significance. I then consider the usefulness of witchcraft as both metaphor and tool for understanding particular political processes, such as ‘McCarthyism’ in the 1950s in the USA, and the so-called ‘new McCarthyism’ of today. It is clear that the issues involved here are highly contested, and so Section Four of this paper attempts to unpack some of them through the use of risk analysis, asking what is seen as dangerous for whom. Even as I completed the first version of this paper, bombs exploded on Madrid trains, and I wrote a short Afterword. In the eighteen months which has elapsed since then, the War on Terror has moved on, not least in terms of the July 7<sup>th</sup> (7/7) London bombings, requiring the Afterword to be re-written. This paper is, then, designed to raise questions and invite comments, it is a ‘think piece’ which is in no sense finished, nor, given its subject-matter, could it ever be so.

## **2. The ‘War on Terror’**

As already noted with reference to the Leach lecture, terrorism is scarcely a new phenomenon. There is a useful short article on the topic in the *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* by Pasquino (1996), who notes that the violence in terrorism is often deliberately symbolic, and that terrorism itself must be considered rational behaviour in the context of alternative options:

Terrorism, even if it is defeated, is not without consequences. The dynamics of political competition, the structures of the state, and the relationship between citizen and political-economic bodies will be changed to an extent that has thus far not been assessed (1996: 73).

Yet it remains a truism to say that one person's terrorist is another's freedom-fighter, a point brought home to me some years ago when I went in a delegation of fellow constituents and Anti-Apartheid activists to urge the then Prime Minister of the UK, Margaret Thatcher, to support sanctions against the South African apartheid regime. In the course of our conversation, we mentioned the name of Nelson Mandela, then a prisoner on Robben Island. Her reply was immediate – she would have no truck with 'terrorists like him'.

As we all know, the response to the cataclysmic events of September 11<sup>th</sup> was the declaration of a 'war on terror', a concept all the more powerful for being both nebulous and seemingly without end<sup>5</sup>. In the United States, there was the passing of the Patriot Act 2002 and the setting up of a new department of 'Homeland Security'. Visa requirements were tightened, and indeed many people were refused visas altogether. Wars were fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, and some of the prisoners detained indefinitely without charge at Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere. New US military bases were set up in many parts of the world. New security measures affected large numbers of people in ways ranging from the trivial (long delays at airports or cancelled flights) to the serious (arrest, being held without charge or access to lawyers, and indefinite detention).

In the UK, searches were conducted and arrests made under the new terrorism laws passed hurriedly after 9/11 and subsequently further sweeping new powers were proposed: indefinite detention without trial, a lower standard of proof for conviction, and a massive increase in the size of MI5 (Britain's equivalent of the American FBI)<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, the country was taken into an unpopular war in Iraq, the political aftermath of which, both internationally and domestically, is still unfolding. There have been endless political wranglings about the reasons for going to war in Iraq and their validity and there have been immense repercussions. Among these may be

---

<sup>5</sup> The University of Michigan's Documents Center hosts an enormous collection of documents pertaining to 'America's war against terrorism' (<http://www.lib.umich.edu/govdocs/usterror.html>): this is a Federal (government) publication. Zmag, a web-based journal, has a huge collection of critical articles, with specific pages devoted to the topic each month (<http://www.zmag.org/terrorframe.htm>).

<sup>6</sup> See 'Sweeping new powers in UK war on terror' *Observer*, Feb. 22<sup>nd</sup> 2004. Available on Guardian website ([www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk))

mentioned the suicide of the weapons inspector Dr. David Kelly<sup>7</sup>, the hearings at the Hutton Enquiry set up to establish the causes of his death, and the Hutton Report itself, followed by the resignation of the BBC's Chair of Governors and its Director-General (see Rogers 2004). Subsequently, the case against the translator Katharine Gun, who blew the whistle on the bugging of UN members during the approach to the Iraq war, was dropped<sup>8</sup>. Nonetheless, as I was initially writing this paper, the British Prime Minister told us that the war on terror is an on-going reality to which we had all better wake up<sup>9</sup>. In part his March 5<sup>th</sup> 2004 speech was a justification of the original decision to take the country to war, a large part of which, he maintained, was the continued and real existence of the terrorist threat:

The nature of the global threat we face in Britain and around the world is real and existential and it is the task of leadership to expose it and fight it, whatever the political cost.

Such a view has not, of course, gone unchallenged. Only a day after Blair's speech, the former UN Chief Weapons Inspector Hans Blix dismissed the argument that the Iraq war was legal, and also referred to the war as a 'witchhunt'<sup>10</sup>.

A year later, Blair's prognostications appeared vindicated when suicide bombers attacked three London trains and a bus, leaving more than fifty people dead and many more wounded. In the ensuing debates, many critics of the war in Iraq argued that this had made Britain, and especially London, a much less safe place, while Blair and his supporters denied that there was any connection.

As has often been remarked, one of the first casualties of war is truth, and, it might be added, the search for truth. In the US, there has been, since September 11<sup>th</sup>, a significant increase in attacks on academic freedom and the vilification of critical academics. Criticisms of academia were already being made around such issues as

---

<sup>7</sup> David Kelly was a British government scientist and weapons inspector who had given an interview to a radio journalist, Andrew Gilligan, material from which was used on the BBC Radio 4's flagship 'Today' programme. Kelly was later interrogated by a Committee of the House of Commons, and shortly afterwards his body was found. The verdict was suicide, but the British government set up a Committee of Inquiry, which blamed the BBC and led to the resignation of the Chair of its Board of Governors and its Director-General. Gilligan also resigned from his job at the BBC. For more information see the Hutton Report 2004 and Rogers 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Katharine Gun was a translator at the British 'listening station' GCHQ who leaked a memo she saw to the Observer newspaper. She was arrested and charged under the Official Secrets Act. Her case became a cause celebre, attracting the support of a number of Hollywood stars. It was dropped, so it was reported, because its pursuit would have been too embarrassing for the government.

<sup>9</sup> The full text was printed in *The Guardian* on March 5<sup>th</sup> 2004 and is available on its website: [www.politics.guardian.co.uk](http://www.politics.guardian.co.uk)

<sup>10</sup> *Guardian* 5<sup>th</sup> March 2004, *Times* 7<sup>th</sup> March 2004.

affirmative action and so-called ‘political correctness’ on US campuses by such organisations as the American Council of Trustees and Alumni<sup>11</sup>, an organisation set up in 1995 by Lynne Cheney and Joseph Lieberman<sup>12</sup>. After September 11<sup>th</sup>, this organisation published a report entitled ‘Defending Civilization: how our universities are failing America, and what can be done about it’. It cited many examples of what it considered ‘unpatriotic acts’ by a number of scholars, mainly people whose specialisms are focused on the Middle East, arguing that ‘when a nation’s intellectuals are unwilling to defend its civilization, they give comfort to its adversaries’ ([www.goacta.org](http://www.goacta.org)).

More recently, a website called *Campuswatch* was set up by the columnist Daniel Pipes. This also pays particular attention to the way Middle Eastern studies are taught in the US. It initially published a list of eight ‘suspect’ academics, but withdrew the list when many others wrote in their support and demanded that their own names be added to the list. Subsequently, it began to publish a list of ‘recommended’ Middle Eastern scholars and has instigated a series of ‘investigations’ into a large number of US and Canadian universities, all listed on its website, where it also invites students to denounce lecturers who are less than ‘patriotic’ in its terms ([www.campus-watch.org](http://www.campus-watch.org)).

Concern about developments such as these has been expressed in many quarters, ranging from faculty in universities, to learned societies such as the American Anthropological Association (AAA)<sup>13</sup> and the Middle Eastern Studies Association (MESA)<sup>14</sup>. Even the website of the American Social Science Research Council (SSRC) voices concern not only that legitimate scholarly work is being hindered, but also that there are now substantial threats to academic freedom.

The Council is deeply concerned about growing threats to intellectual integrity and openness in the present political climate... What is the proper balance between legitimate security concerns and the intellectual freedoms that undergird a dynamic and productive society? This is a pressing question in the current context of H.R.

---

<sup>11</sup> [www.goacta.org](http://www.goacta.org)

<sup>12</sup> Similar complaints have been voiced by the National Association of Scholars ([www.nas.org](http://www.nas.org))

<sup>13</sup> [www.aaanet.org](http://www.aaanet.org)

<sup>14</sup> [www.arizona.edu/mesassoc/](http://www.arizona.edu/mesassoc/)

3077<sup>15</sup>, the Patriot Act, various mechanisms for monitoring foreign students, the monitoring of library use, and of some strains of research.

In response to these perceived threats, the SSRC published a series of papers. These include the Presidential Address of the MESA incumbent, defending Middle Eastern Studies and its scholars (Anderson 2003), a number of articles on the government funding of Middle Eastern Studies under HR 3077, and an article by its own President, Craig Calhoun who argued strenuously that ‘The pursuit of knowledge depends not merely on peace, but on open minds and open borders’ yet adds ‘Fears of war, terrorism, disease and economic instability drive new pressures for insularity’ (Calhoun nd).

Such attacks on civil liberties and academic freedom are often referred to as either the ‘new McCarthyism’ or a ‘witch-hunt’ (e.g. Rothschild 2002, Cole 2003, Ker 2003, Monbiot 2001, Johnson 2002). So let us turn next to the question of witchcraft, witch-finding and witch-hunts.

### **3. Witchcraft and witch-finding: Africa and elsewhere**

The study of witchcraft, especially in Africa, has a long history within the discipline of anthropology<sup>16</sup>. During the heyday of structural functionalism, witchcraft was analysed in a number of different ways: as a set of beliefs, frequently including inverted patterns of behaviour; as ‘rituals of verification’ and patterns of accusation; and as a ‘social-strain’ gauge. The ‘rationality’ of witchcraft beliefs was endlessly debated. Such approaches to the subject were influential not only within the discipline, but also spilled over into historical studies of European witchcraft such as those by Macfarlane (1970) and Thomas (1971).

Fifty years later, many anthropologists, including myself, did not expect to be writing about the subject again. It was not necessarily that we thought that such beliefs and practices no longer existed, but rather perhaps that we thought that there were more important things to write about. Yet events over the last decade or so have proved us wrong. We find not only witchcraft accusations widespread but even killings in areas as far apart as South Africa (Ralushai Report 1996, Niehaus 2001) and Tanzania (Mesaki 1994). In the Cameroons, government courts now convict and

---

<sup>15</sup> Efforts were made in Congress to exercise greater control over the Title VI International Studies programme by setting up Boards to scrutinise International Studies and Area Studies Title VI Centers. Many academics protested such proposals. See websites of SSRC, MESA and AAA.



sentence people deemed to be witches (Geschiere 1997), and there have been calls elsewhere (e.g. South Africa<sup>17</sup>) for similar recognition of the problem and action to counter it. It is generally accepted that in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, there is increased fear of witches and witchcraft, and that accusations are rising. Geschiere (ibid) notes that the most recent studies have in common a number of factors:

- Witchcraft is a changing set of notions reflecting and reinterpreting new circumstances
- It is part of large-scale historical processes.
- It plays a crucial role in contemporary relations of power and violence
- Understanding the broader configurations is essential for understanding their local manifestations

Witchcraft is not a hangover from the past, but rather a way of dealing with the present; it is an intrinsic part of modernity in Africa.

But is this a peculiarly *African* phenomenon? Or can we find parallels elsewhere? There is certainly a burgeoning literature on beliefs in witchcraft and practices around it in the West. Some studies, for example that by Favret-Saada (1980), suggest that in areas of France like the Bocage, such ideas have continuity with the past. Others, particularly focusing on Britain, see a revival of witchcraft as part of the rise of neo-pagan movements (Greenwood 2000, Lurhman 1985). Interesting and important as these studies are, they usually involve small numbers of relatively marginalised people. In that respect, they are somewhat different from the beliefs and practices reported from Africa which appear to concern the majority of people in the societies concerned. Nonetheless, British witchcraft may impinge significantly on public consciousness in terms of moral panics around accusations of satanic abuse of children (Lafontaine 1994, Greenwood 2003).

Back in 1997, Peter Geschiere proposed that this *imaginaire* is indeed not peculiar to Africa, citing parallels between the political roles of witch-doctors in African politics and spin-doctors in the West.

I was often struck by the parallel with the role attributed to public relations experts in American politics (and increasingly in Europe as well): Their ability to bring success stems from their esoteric, and more or less magical, knowledge. The politicians' gains and losses seem to depend less on the people's support than on the effectiveness of the experts' secret actions. Most importantly, both in Africa and in Europe, the

---

<sup>16</sup> The literature is immense, but for useful summaries, see Moore and Sanders 2001, Douglas 1970

<sup>17</sup> See for example Carstens 2003, Kohnert 2003a and b, Ashforth 2001.

intervention of such experts, loaded with esoteric knowledge, seems to remove power from the people (p. 9).

This was an idea he subsequently developed in an article published a few years later (Geschiere 2002), noting that a dichotomy between westerners and Africans is often based upon contrasts between witchcraft, magic and irrationality on the one hand, and scientific, transparent, and rational procedures on the other. Yet, as he points out, there is also ‘a precarious and constantly changing balance of secrecy and publicity, revelation and concealment, which may be inherent to the exercise of power in general’ and that ‘the activities of both serve to draw a screen around power’ (page ref?). Indeed, Geschiere maintains that the imaginary is as important in western as it is in African politics, noting that, while it is impossible ever to verify what really happened in the case of witchcraft, this is equally true of, for instance, the murder of President Kennedy. Geschiere bases his western political example on Clinton and his ‘spin-doctors’, but it might be equally interesting to carry out a similar analysis on recent British politics, especially in relation to recent allegations of ‘spin’ around the dossiers drawn up by the British government prior to war in Iraq.

Witchcraft has long been used in the west as a metaphor or allegory for certain political processes, particularly in terms of ‘witch-hunts’. One of the most notable contexts was the period during the Cold War when Senator Joseph McCarthy alleged that there were communists or communist sympathisers occupying important positions in American institutions: government, the universities and the media, including Hollywood. McCarthy was able to convince others of the dangers of this situation, and the House Committee on Un-American Activities began to hold hearings. Many people were summoned for their supposed communist sympathies and asked to name others. One such was the playwright Arthur Miller, who in response wrote his play ‘The Crucible’, using the Salem witch-trials of the 17<sup>th</sup> century as an allegory for the events of the 1950s in America<sup>18</sup>. Many who refused to name names were driven from their jobs, or found themselves unable to work or publish, and not a few left the US to live elsewhere<sup>19</sup>.

Today, using the Google search engine, and keying in the term ‘McCarthyism’, produces almost as many references to the ‘new McCarthyism’ as it

---

<sup>18</sup> Miller was denounced by the film director Elia Kazan although Miller himself refused to give any names at his hearing.

does to the old. Whole websites are devoted to the topic, some giving examples of its prevalence in modern American life (e.g. ‘McCarthyismwatch’ set up as part of [www.progressive.org](http://www.progressive.org)). So to what extent does a comparison between accusations of witchcraft in Sub-Saharan Africa, and western accusations ranging from unpatriotic behaviour to terrorism hold up? Both witchcraft and terrorism are hidden and secret activities, both are considered immoral, indeed, the embodiment of evil, by those who use these discourses. It is widely considered that both witches and terrorists should be severely punished. Conviction for either crime is dependent upon expert knowledge which may however be kept secret. Indeed, the parallels between Geschiere’s description of the evidence required to convict a witch in the Cameroons, and that needed to incarcerate someone in Bagram air base, Guantanamo Bay, or Belmarsh prison in the UK, are somewhat similar: what is crucial is the testimony of the witchfinder or intelligence agent.

The fact that ‘new McCarthyism’ is termed a ‘witchhunt’ is not just about allegories and metaphors, but rather indicates that similar political processes are going on (as Geschiere 2002 has suggested for witch-doctors and spin-doctors). Such processes are about relations of domination and subordination; they are about what Clarke (2004) has termed the ‘political-cultural work that is required to produce and reproduce power... the energy and effort that is needed to make domination and subordination continue...’ (p. 13). They are also, of course, about resistance and alternatives.

And yet it is clear that the discourse concerning the War on Terror is not a universal one – how could it be? In some parts of the world, there are those who may regard Islamic ‘terrorists’, for example, as martyrs and heroes<sup>20</sup>. Some European nations, or at least their governments, supported the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, while others opposed them. In the West, many people have shown, through demonstrations, resignations, writing and other forms of protest, that they reject the premises on which the idea of the War on Terror is founded, and the courses of action which have flowed from it. So why do some people accept a particular view of the war on terror, and others do not? In the next section, I turn to risk and its perception,

---

<sup>19</sup> There is a voluminous literature on the McCarthy period. An interesting recent account is Ellen Schrecker 1998, see also 2002.

<sup>20</sup> There is a widespread view in the Muslim world (including the Swahili coast of East Africa) that 9/11 was actually engineered by the Israelis.

which involves a consideration of danger, trust and blame, and the construction of a moral community.

#### **4. Dangers and threats: the perception of risk**

I first became interested in the topic of risk when I was working on issues of food and health in Britain in the early 1990s (Caplan 1997). At that time, the government was anxious to improve people's eating habits, and some money went into campaigns for 'healthy eating'. It was of course a miniscule amount by comparison with that spent on advertising. It was also extremely ineffective and has continued to be so<sup>21</sup>. Subsequent food studies carried out in the UK found regularly that people were well aware of the messages of the healthy eating campaigns, but most ignored them for a variety of complex reasons (Keane 1997).

The relationship between government policy and public behaviour is an interesting one. Recently, there have been proposals to restrict advertising of fatty foods or even to put a tax on them in order to discourage their consumption, but the government has decided against this measure, leaving it up to voluntary codes of conduct on the part of advertisers, and 'choice' for 'consumers'. On the other hand, the present regime appears determined to allow the commercial growing of genetically modified crops (so-called GMOs – sometimes popularly termed 'Frankenstein foods'), in spite of widespread public opposition in the UK, and indeed in most other European states. The announcement that the first GMO maize varieties were to be licensed for cultivation was made as I was writing this paper.<sup>22</sup>

So here we have a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, the government says that 'eating fatty/sugary food is risky' but the public continues to eat it in large quantities nonetheless. On the other hand, the government says that eating genetically modified foods, or products from animals fed on GMO foods, is not risky but the public disagrees and resists<sup>23</sup>. In order to understand this, we would need to look the kind of political pressures around the food industry, and ask who wields what clout, which I don't have time to do in this paper.

---

<sup>21</sup> The UK currently has the highest rates of obesity in Europe

<sup>22</sup> See Guardian 8th March 2004 – most other papers carried the story and gave it prominence.

<sup>23</sup> There have been other similar situations, such as the 'crisis of confidence' in the safety of beef consumption as a result of the BSE scares (see Caplan 1997b) and an even more complex situation around foot and mouth disease.

How does this paradox work in terms of first the war in Iraq, and then the war on terror? Here the British government claimed to be convinced of a serious threat (or acted as if it was), while many members of the public were more sceptical. The American public, for the most part, at least initially, appeared to go along with its government, although this situation appears to have changed in the last few months. I'd like now to discuss some of the anthropological and sociological literature on risk in order to consider why it is that some perceive threats and dangers where others do not, or that many may agree on the threats, but espouse very different ways of dealing with them (risk management).

Let us begin by considering the work of Mary Douglas, whose early writing on risk with Wildavsky (1982) was probably well ahead of its time. In this book and her subsequent work on the topic, she differentiates between *risk* and *risk perception*, seeing the latter as socially and culturally constructed. Early in their book, Douglas and Wildavsky consider and reject the argument that science can give us the answers to risk since science is itself a form of knowledge and all knowledge is contested. Later they go on to make the case for *the social selection of risk*. They conclude that it is 'the type of society which generates the type of accountability and focuses concern on particular dangers' (p. 7) and that this was as true of the USA in general at the time of writing as it was villages in Zaire (where Douglas carried out her first anthropological fieldwork in the 1950s). Indeed, they are concerned to utilise the insights gained by anthropology in the study of small-scale societies and apply them to Western society, particularly America, noting that they want to understand 'us' as well as 'them'.

One of the major arguments in their book *Risk and Culture*, which is also taken up in Douglas' later work on risk (1985, 1992) is that societies, and categories within societies, *choose their nightmares on both social and cultural criteria*, and thus their nightmares are different. Furthermore, although the authors do not make this point, it is equally clear that society's nightmares can and do change – the ones she cites for North America in the 1980s, such as the nuclear holocaust, are not the current ones, which are largely focused on the terrorist threat, even though nuclear weapons remain numerous and are almost certainly proliferating.

Douglas sees her work on risk as a continuation of her earlier writing on purity and pollution (1966), with its concern for understanding knowledge and cognition. She suggests that not only does a culture need a common forensic vocabulary with

which to hold persons accountable, but that risk is also a word that admirably serves the forensic needs of the *new global culture*. It also brings in the question of morality:

To be 'at risk' is equivalent to being sinned against... America has gone farther down the path of cultural individualism, and so can make more use of the forensic potential of the idea of risk... The neutral vocabulary of risk is all we have for making a bridge between the known facts of existence and the construction of a *moral community* (1992, p. 28).

It can scarcely have escaped notice that much of the discourse around the war on terror is also couched in highly moralistic terms. Terrorism is seen by the west as evil incarnate emanating from and supported by an 'axis of evil', as a threat to democracy, to 'civilised values', to 'our way of life'. The moral community is constructed as 'those who are with us' and the enemies as 'those who are against us'. Such a discourse actively constructs alterity, and allows the other to be treated differently, including in terms of human rights and civil liberties.

For Douglas, both risk and sin involve an exploration of blame: 'Blaming is a way of manning the gates through which all information has to pass... and at the same time arming the guard' (p. 19).<sup>24</sup> Clearly the war on terror has involved both of these processes. The gates are manned literally in terms of detentions, immigration and visas, but also in terms of the passage of information, much of which is classified as 'secret', while only certain discourses are permitted, as reports of dismissals of journalists in the US for failure to be on-message suggests (Cole 2003, Rothschild 2002)<sup>25</sup>.

Douglas suggests that in both places under consideration (the USA and Zaire), 'individuals transfer their decision-making to the institutions in which they live' (p. 78). For this reason, 'the proper way to organise a programme of studying risk is to start with studying *institutional design*' (p. 19), a topic which she had addressed earlier in her book *How Institutions Think* (1986). Clearly, if the major perceived risk is a terrorist threat, individuals are not in a position to counter it themselves, and must hand over responsibility to the state and its institutions. This may provide, as Cole suggests, a big opportunity to change those institutions.

---

<sup>24</sup> This premise enables her once again to draw apparently unlikely parallels between, for example, the adversarial, litigious culture of North America, in which someone is blamed or sued for every misfortune, and the Lele people of Zaire, who also rarely accepted that misfortune or death were due to natural causes.

<sup>25</sup> In Britain, some politicians such as George Galloway (Labour) and Jenny Tonge (Liberal-Democrat) have been censured or sanctioned.

In short, then, Douglas is interested in *difference*, in explaining why different societies, and different groups in complex societies, view risk differently. She sees the answer to these puzzles as lying in cultural analysis, in categorising social systems, and in terms of the knowledge and cognition which such systems produce. Her work also suggests the importance of social positionality in predicting risk perceptions.

Douglas has not been without her critics. Some have seen her arguments as too relativist, arguing that some risks, such as various kinds of environmental catastrophe, cannot be dismissed as simply nightmares, as they are all too 'real'. Others have seen her work as too conservative with its assumption that 'the centre' will sort it out (Skinner 2000). I would also maintain that the argument that risk perception appears to spring from particular social and cultural formations leaves little room for agency, or for considerations of power, control and resistance. Who constructs risk scenarios, how, when, why and for whom? Who has access to the knowledge that enables judgement? Who are the 'experts'? (Caplan 2000). Governments obtain their legitimacy for risk management in terms of their claims to possession of greater knowledge than the lay public; such knowledge is derived from 'experts', whether these be intelligence gatherers (in the case of terrorism) or scientists (in the case of GMOs). As Day points out (2000), one aspect of risk management is that, in its name, control can be asserted by governments or other bodies over populations and thus risk is 'disciplinary' in a Foucauldian sense.

Sociologists such as Beck and Giddens, writing slightly later about what Beck calls 'risk society' (1992) and Giddens 'high modernity' (1991), are in some respects more ready to engage with the political implications of risk. Beck, for instance, sees 'risk society' as a catastrophic society, and contends that this factor has political potential since 'averting and managing these [risks] can include a reorganisation of power and authority' (p. 4). This would certainly apply to the war on terror. He also argues that in risk society, knowledge of risks gains a new significance: whereas in class societies, *being determines consciousness*, in risk societies *consciousness determines being*. Indeed, he sees a growth in reflexivity as an inevitable concomitant of risk society, with people increasingly taking, or being expected to take, responsibility for their own risk management. Such an argument works well in terms of, for example, debates over GMO crops, but it works rather less well in terms of the war on terror which is premised upon universal acceptance of the threat and universal acquiescence in the measures needed to counter them. Here rather we see in operation

the argument of Douglas that (many) people transfer decision-making around risk to institutions, especially when the perceived risk to their well-being is immediate and serious.

So how useful are such arguments in considering differing perceptions of danger, whether of witches or terrorists? One of the problems with the work of writers such as Beck and Giddens is that they are primarily looking at and generalising from 'modern' (technologically advanced) societies although some of the risks they consider are global ones. The view of the risks of AIDS in, say, a village in Tanzania, will be rather different from that in the West, although this is certainly not an argument in favour of the tradition-modernity dichotomy which both of these authors use. We need to ask why these particular risks and why now? We might ask, for example, why it is that terrorism is widely portrayed in the western media as the major risk in the world today? Why are other dangers, such as the potentially catastrophic consequences of climate change and global warming, ignored or denied, especially by the US<sup>26</sup>? What about the dangers to life in Africa from war, famine, and AIDS? I very much doubt if the nightmares of the villagers I work with on Mafia Island Tanzania are about terrorism; rather they are about how they will make ends meet.<sup>27</sup>

Isak Niehaus ends his book on the occult in the Lowveld of South Africa by suggesting that witchcraft beliefs have less to do with African identity than with experiences of 'misery, marginalisation, illness, poverty and insecurity' (2001: 192). Are these the 'real' issues, the major risks? Suppose that we consider, as has been argued by some writing on earlier accusations of witchcraft in England, that the accused were effectively scapegoats, and that the witch-hunting terror was a convenient diversion away from the real social and economic problems of the time (Harris 1974, Ehrenreich and English 1973). Could the same set of arguments be made around the war on terror? A number of commentators have argued that it is effectively a smokescreen for other really important issues, such as growing social inequality, the future of global capitalism and the control over oil and other energy

---

<sup>26</sup> Although a recent 'secret' report from the Pentagon, leaked to the Observer newspaper, paints an apocalyptic picture of the consequences of global warming (including violent storms, rising sea levels and mega-droughts), population increase, access to water, nuclear arms proliferation (*Observer* 22<sup>nd</sup> Feb. 2004: 'Pentagon tells Bush: climate change will destroy us' and that 'threat to the world is greater than terrorism')

<sup>27</sup> Maybe the same is true of the estimated 31 million Americans who live below the poverty line



supplies<sup>28</sup>. Similarly, while many commentators have agreed that the ‘real’ motives for the war in Iraq were not weapons of mass destruction, but rather oil, fewer have taken the trouble to spell out the meaning and consequences of the post-war economic changes being wrought in Iraq<sup>29</sup>.<sup>30</sup> In Britain, this was happening while the attention of the media and public was turned for months to the events leading up to the suicide of Dr. David Kelly, and the fall-out from the Hutton Report. Little of the voluminous reporting around these events contained any mention of oil. Rather the focus concerned trust, or lack of it, in governments which had gone to war on what some thought were spurious grounds.

### **Conclusion: connecting witchcraft and terror**

In this paper, I have suggested first of all that there are important parallels between witchcraft and the pursuit of the war on terror. Secondly, that both are characterised by perceptions of risk and danger. Those who are blamed are excluded from the moral community and punished. In such procedures, the role of experts is crucial. In order to understand what is going on, we need to ask standard anthropological questions about the construction of knowledge and risk, and claims to truth, as well as who is saying and doing what, when, where and how. As Douglas has suggested, just as anthropological studies of witchcraft accusers and accused reveal a great deal about the societies in question, so too can risk - including I would argue the risk of terror - be used 'forensically'. Exploration of society's nightmares, whether via witchcraft or terror, tells us a great deal more about how societies work, and about power and control, compliance and resistance and how these are achieved, than simply heading for the overtly political domain.

We can use insights gleaned from micro-studies of particular societies in particular times and places to understand much wider social processes, although we need to do so by some deft footwork between micro- and macro-levels, to perform what the Comaroffs have termed ‘ethnography on an awkward scale’ (Comaroffs

---

<sup>28</sup> See Arundhati Roy ‘Not again’ in the *Guardian Weekly* October 3-9, 2002 p. 23, Ian Roberts ‘Car wars’ *Guardian* Jan. 18<sup>th</sup> 2003.

<sup>29</sup> In reporting the fact that contracts for post-war reconstruction are being handed only to companies which are either American or based in those states which supported the war, few have stopped to ask why such contracts are not being given to Iraqis themselves.

<sup>30</sup> These include the privatisation of 200 state companies, the permitting of 100% foreign ownership, and 100% repatriation of profits (Naomi Klein. ‘Iraq is not America’s to sell’ *Guardian*, Nov. 7<sup>th</sup> 2003).

1999.282). Our fields here will not only be multi-sited, but also on many different levels. Some will be accessible through conventional anthropological means and methods, others will require different approaches, such as the kind of ‘netography’ I have used here.

### **Postscript 1: post Madrid, post London 7/7**

As I completed the first version of this paper, the bombs exploded on the Spanish trains, 200 people were killed, 1500 wounded. The Spanish government rushed to attribute blame to the Basque separatist group ETA (which denied it), and to distance itself from the possibility that they might be the work of groups connected with Al Qaida (which did claim responsibility). Three days later, the electorate, incensed by what it considered to be lies, voted out the government which had been expected to gain another term in office. Meanwhile, security was stepped up in all European cities, and most particularly in those states which had supported the war in Iraq.

Just over a year later, bombs exploded on London underground trains and a bus; over fifty people were killed and many more wounded. This time the attacks were very close to home: like most Londoners, I regularly use the tube, including one of the lines that was bombed, and the bus was blown up within a stone’s throw of the central University of London. Like others, I think of these things when I board a tube train, or pass by the square where the bus bomb was detonated. So is the analysis different when events become near and not far? I don’t think so.

Writing about terror is not an easy decision; it involves thinking difficult but necessary thoughts. None of us is outside of the present scenario, not only in terms of our outrage, anger and grief when we witness scenes of carnage, our fears when we travel on a plane or a train, but also in terms of the innumerable consequences of the new forms of terrorist attacks and its ever-spreading ripples. We in Europe and America are also implicated in the rhetoric and actions of our governments, the ways in which they define terror and respond to it. In the same week that the bombs exploded in Madrid, five Britons were released from Guantanamo Bay, and many in Britain and elsewhere learned in horrifying detail of conditions there.

What is most dangerous in the present scenario is a failure to think and contemplate, a willingness to consider and re-consider, as well as to speak and act. Dismissing terrorists as ‘fanatics’, ‘people you cannot dialogue with’, ‘people without

reason' (all terms used widely in the recent past) is a foolish error. As Leach noted in his Munro lecture quoted earlier, it is the equivalent of the mediaeval pope who preached a crusade against the Mongols overwhelming Europe, describing them as having the heads of dogs and eating human flesh. It is what Hannerz aptly calls 'radical othering' (2003: 169).

### **Postscript 2: December 2005**

Since this paper was written and presented, events have moved on apace, and there has been no lack of commentary in the media

## References

- Abrams, Ray (ed.) 1994. *Witchcraft in Contemporary Tanzania* Cambridge: African Studies Centre.
- Anderson, Lisa, 2003. 'Scholarship, policy debate and conflict: why we study the Middle East and why it matters' *Middle Eastern Studies Association Bulletin*, 38, 1. Summer.
- Ashforth, Adam, 2001. 'AIDS, Witchcraft and the problems of power in post-apartheid South Africa' Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science, School of Advanced Study, Princeton (available on <http://www.sss.ias.edu/papers/paperten.pdf>) (Sighted 3/1/04).
- Beck, U. 1992 [1986]. *Risk Society: towards a new modernity*. (London: Sage Publications)
- --- 1994. 'The Reinvention of Politics: Towards a theory of reflexive modernization' in Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994.
- Blair, Tony, 2004. Speech given in his Sedgefield Constituency, March 5, 2004. *Guardian*, March 5.
- Caplan, Pat, 1997a (ed.) *Food, Health and Identity*. London and New York: Routledge.
- --- 1997b. 'Eating British Beef with Confidence' in Caplan 1997 (op cit)
- --- 2000 (ed.) *Risk Revisited*. London: Pluto Press.
- ---2002. 'Anthropology as a moral discipline: social justice, ethics and human rights'. Keynote lecture given at the Canadian Association of Sociologists and Anthropologists annual conference, Windsor, Canada. Available on <http://homepages.gold.ac.uk/pat-caplan/social-justice.pdf>
- --- 2003 (ed.). *The Ethics of Anthropology: debates and dilemmas*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Calhoun, Craig, nd (2003 or 2004) 'Social science and the crisis of internationalism: a reflection on how we work after the war in Iraq' Social Science Research Council ([www.ssrc.org/president\\_office/crisis-of-internationalism.page](http://www.ssrc.org/president_office/crisis-of-internationalism.page)) (Sighted 3/1/04).
- Carstens, Pieter, 2003. 'The cultural defence in criminal law: South African perspectives' (<http://www.isrc.org/papers/Carstens.pdf>) (Sighted 3/1/04).
- Clarke, John, 2004. 'What's it for? The Work of Anthropology and the Work of 9/11' *Critique of Anthropology* 24 (1): 9-14.
- Cole, David, 2003. 'The new McCarthyism: repeating history in the war on terror' (<http://www.law.harvard.edu/students/orgs/crc1/v.38/cole.pdf>) (Sighted 3/1/04).
- Comaroff, Jean and John Comaroff, 1993. *Modernity and its Malcontents: ritual and power in postcolonial Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- ---1999. 'Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: notes from the South African postcolony'. *American Anthropologist* 26, 2: 279-303.
- Davison, Charlie, Davison, C., G. D. Smith and S. Frankel (1991). 'Lay epidemiology and the prevention paradox: the implications of coronary candidacy for health education' *Social Health and Illness* 13, 1.
- Davison, C., S. Frankel and G. Davey-Smith (1992) 'The limits of life-style: reassessing 'fatalism' in the popular culture of illness prevention' *Social Science and Medicine* 34: 675-85.

- Day, Sophie, 2000. 'The politics of risk among London prostitutes' in Caplan 2000 op. cit.
- Douglas, Mary 1970. 'Introduction' to (ed.) *Witchcraft: Confessions and Accusations*. London: Tavistock.
- --- 1985. *Risk Acceptability According to the Social Sciences*. Russell Sage/Routledge
- --- 1986. *How Institutions Think*. Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press.
- --- 1992. *Risk and Blame: essays in cultural theory*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Douglas, M. and A. Wildaskvy, 1982. *Risk and Culture: an Essay on the Selection of Environmental and Technological Dangers*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara and Deirdre English, 1973. *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: a history of women healers*. London: Writers and Readers.
- Favret-Saada, Jeanne, 1980. *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Friedman, Thomas. 1999. *The Lexus and the Olive-tree*. London: Harper-Collins.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.
- Geschiere, Peter, 2002. 'On witch-doctors and spin-doctors; the role of 'experts' in African and American politics' in B. Meyer and P. Pels (eds.) *Magic and Modernity*. Stanford University Press.
- Giddens, Anthony, 1991. *Modernity and Self-identity: self and society in the late modern age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gledhill, John (2000) 'Finding a new public face for anthropology', *Anthropology Today*, 16 (6): 1-3.
- Greenwood, Susan, 2000. *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld*. London and Oxford: Berg.
- ---2003. 'British paganism, morality and the politics of knowledge' in Caplan 2000 op. cit.
- Hannerz, Ulf, 2003. 'Macro-scenarios: anthropology and the debate over contemporary and future worlds'. *Social Anthropology* 11, 2: 169-197.
- Harris, Marvin, *Cows, pigs, wars and witches; riddles of culture*. New York: Random House.
- Huntingdon, Samuel, 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Hutton, Lord, 2004. *The Hutton Report*. London: Stationery Office Books.
- Kaplan, Robert, 1996. *The Ends of the Earth*. New York: Random House.
- Keane, Annie, 1997. 'Too hard to swallow? The palatability of healthy eating advice' in Caplan 1997.
- Kennedy, Paul, 1987. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. New York: Random House.
- Ker, Raymond, 2003. 'The new McCarthysim: bulwark against regime change (<http://globalresearch.ca/articles/KER310A.html>) (downloaded 3/2/04)
- Kohnert, Dick, 2002. 'The impact of occult belief systems on democratization and development in African societies: working hypotheses and case studies.' Paper given at the conference on 'Culture, and political foundations of socio-economic development in Africa and Asia, October 6-11, 2002. Monte Verita, Switzerland. ([www.ethno.unizh.ch/csfconference/files/manus/kohnert\\_manus1.pdf](http://www.ethno.unizh.ch/csfconference/files/manus/kohnert_manus1.pdf))

- ---2003. 'Witchcraft and transnational social spaces: witchcraft violence, reconciliation and development in South Africa's transition process' *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 41, 2, 1-29.
- La Fontaine, Jean, 1994. *The Extent and Nature of Organised and Ritual Abuse: Research Findings*. London: HMSO.
- Leach, Edmund, 1967. *Custom, Law and Terrorist Violence*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Luhrman, Tanya, 1986. *Persuasions of the Witches' Craft*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Macfarlane, Alan, 1970. *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Mesaki, Simeon, 1994. 'Witch-killings in Sukumaland' in Abrams op cit.
- Miller, Arthur, 1968 [1953] *The Crucible*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Monbiot, George. 2001. 'The new McCarthyism: charges of anti-Americanism are themselves anti-American' *Guardian* October, 16.
- Moore, Henrietta and Todd Sanders (eds.), 2001. *Magical Interpretations, Magical Realities: Modernity, witchcraft and the occult in postcolonial Africa*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Pasquino, Gianfranco, 1996. 'Terrorism' in *The Social Science Encyclopaedia* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) New York and London: Routledge: pp. 872-3.
- Ralushai, N.V., M.V. Masinga, DMM Madiba, J.A. van den Heever, T.J. Mathiba, M.E. Mphaphuli, M.W. Mokwena, V. Nolov and D. Matabane, 1996. *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Witchcraft Violence and Ritual Murders in the Northern Province of South Africa*. (popularly known as the Ralushai Report) Government of South Africa.
- Rogers, Simon, 2004. (ed) *The Hutton Inquiry and its Impact*. London: Politicos Publishing for Guardian Newspapers.
- Rothschild, Matthew, 2002. 'The new McCarthyism' Jan 2002 issue of *The Progressive* ([www.progressive.org/0901/roth0102.html](http://www.progressive.org/0901/roth0102.html)) (Sighted 29/2/04)
- Schrecker, Ellen, 1998. *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America*. Little, Brown and Company.
- ---2002. *The Age of McCarthyism: a brief history with documents*. Bedford Books.
- Skinner, Jonathan, 2000. 'The eruption of Chance's Peak, Montserrat, and the narrative containment of risk' in Caplan 2000 (op. cit.).
- Social Science Research Council, *Security and Threats to Intellectual Freedom*. (<http://www.ssrc.org/Threats-to-Intellectual-Freedom>) (Sighted 3/1/04)
- Thomas, Keith, 1971. *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to the organiser of the 'New Social Formations' seminar series at the University of Stellenbosch for the invitation to present this paper, and to the participants who offered useful comments. The paper was also given at the Centre for Urban and Cultural Research, Goldsmiths College in November 2004, and I am grateful to the Chair, Prof. Les Back, and other participants for their suggestions. My colleague Alpa Shah read the latter version of the paper and made comments, while Lionel Caplan, as always, read various versions and gave helpful suggestions.

**Editor's Note:** An anonymous copy of this article was reviewed by two reviewers.