

Risks, Indeterminacy and A New World Order: Critical Reflections on the September 11 Incident

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摘要

911 恐怖襲擊提示現代人要常作反省，一方面我們發覺我們面對的風險其實帶有相當不可知的成份。另一方面我們也發覺在政客義正詞嚴的演說的背後，其實往往隱藏自以為是，妄自尊大等人類共通的弱點。直至我們能互相尊重各方的觀點和文化，恐怕人類互相尋仇復仇的悲劇還會繼續下去。

My first reaction to the news of the September 11 terrorist attack can be summarized in the Chinese saying: "When will these revenges based on endless gripe end?"

Society in late modernity is a world risk society, so says German sociologist Ulrich Beck. The risks of the epoch are unpredictable, immeasurable and seemingly insurmountable. This is part of what I got from my literature review on my Ph.D. thesis *The Daya Bay nuclear power plant debate: Social drama, discourse power struggle and intertextuality*. Suddenly, nuclear power plants return to our attention. The populist demand to relocate nuclear plants away from population centers, denounced as symptomatic of the 'selfish' mentality so-called NIMBY (not in my backyard), seems to make a lot more sense. Chinese folklore also embraces such wisdom, evident in idioms like "A gentleman does not stand under a faltering wall" and "Not only can water float a boat, but it can also capsize it."

All of a sudden, the positivist rationalist belief that risks are calculable, and life is predictable becomes suspect. The modernist discourse that all risks are relative, comparable in mathematical terms, and hence subject to control is open to challenge. The Utilitarian discourse of mathematics and the accompanying worldview handed down from Bentham go bankrupt overnight as insurance companies refused to insure flights. It is no longer appropriate to compare risks residents in the neighborhood of a nuclear power plant entail as a result of exposure to radioactivity with risks like dying from traffic accidents or eating contaminated hairy crabs.

The alternative worldview would be to regard 'things' as transient, volatile and ultimately unpredictable. Discourse then becomes contestable, multi-modal and ultimately indeterminate. Life which used to be so much anchored in language suddenly suffers from a poverty of epithets, adjectives, metaphors and language itself. As

society truly turns postmodern, words become postlingual.

i) The modernist complacency on which this and other 'developed', post-industrial societies rest is founded on an unwavering trust in the post-war world order. To a large extent, it resides in a worldview feeding on the continuation of the neo-imperialist, neo-Eurocentric (if we count the U.S. Canada, Japan, Australia, etc. as one big privileged bloc sharing common interests and common discourses) world order neatly mirrored in various organizations and alliances, diplomatic, economic and even cultural contributing to its survival and expansion (witness China's entry into the WTO).

ii) Perhaps it's about time to critically reflect on the self-righteous, almost altruistic discourses justifying the very existence and continuation of this world order. In this climate of indeterminacy, an easy way out would be to go back to tradition, anchoring oneself in the comfort of a New Conservatism. Tony Blair's anti-terrorist speech is impressive and rightly deserves acclaim, but behind the façade built up by universalistic, humanistic appeals lies the brutal reality of a police state knowing no boundaries and no restraint, not to mention self-restraint. The Cold War rhetoric on one side and the 'messianic' anti-Crusades rhetoric on the other are equally futile, and can only engender yet more revenge and counter-revenge.

Altruistic claims from no matter origin are pointless until all voices, all discourses and all languages receive equal attention and equal entitlements to speak. Only then and until then is there any opportunity for enduring peaceful co-existence. Let's condemn terrorism and all forms of aggression, including linguistic aggression.