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Insecurity and Politics: A Framework¹

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Abstract. This article explores the role of political leaders in the social construction of collective insecurity. Two parts comprise the article. The first part introduces the concepts of collective insecurity, state protection, and “threat infrastructure”; the second part takes a critical look at the literature on moral panic and formulates an integrated framework for the analysis of the politics of insecurity. Starting from the assumption that political leaders help shape the perception of collective threats despite the existence of enduring structural constraints, this framework comprises five main theoretical claims. Taken individually, several of these claims are present in existing sociology and political science literatures. Yet, this contribution articulates such claims in order to formulate an integrated framework that bridges streams of scholarship that are too rarely discussed together in current debates on the politics of insecurity.

Résumé. Cet article explore le rôle des acteurs politiques dans la construction sociale de l’insécurité collective. L’article se divise en deux parties. La première partie introduit les concepts d’insécurité collective, de protection étatique et d’«infrastructure du risque»; la deuxième partie formule un cadre d’analyse intégré pour l’étude de la politique de l’insécurité. Partant du principe que les leaders politiques affectent la perception des dangers collectifs malgré l’existence de contraintes structurelles, ce cadre d’analyse articule cinq grandes propositions théoriques. Prises individuellement, certaines de ces propositions sont déjà présentes dans certains travaux de sociologie et de science politique. Toutefois, la présente contribution articule ces propositions dans le but de créer un cadre d’analyse cohérent qui intègre des perspectives théoriques trop rarement discutées conjointement dans les débats contemporains sur la politique de l’insécurité.

During the 2004 US presidential campaign, the Republican Party ran a television ad showing menacing wolves roaming a dark forest. Simultaneously, a female voice warned potential voters that “weakness attracts those who are waiting to do America harm” (Associated Press 2004). During a campaign that focused on national security, this ad clearly suggested that only George W. Bush and his fellow Republicans could protect the United States against the growing army of terrorist wolves. Earlier that year, a young sociologist

1 Acknowledgements: The author would like to thank Kevin Haggerty, Angela Kempf, Nico Stehr, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on previous drafts of this article. Special thanks to Ariel Ducey, Sean Hier, Erin Gibbs Van Brunshot, William Leiss, John Myles, George Ritzer, and Charles Tilly for their insight on the politics of insecurity.

published an article demonstrating, with quantitative analyses, that the federal terror warnings issued in the aftermath of the events of September 11 consistently increased popular support for the Republican President (Willer 2004). This example raises a crucial question: what is the concrete role of political leaders and strategies in the social construction of collective insecurity? In part because most of the recent books devoted to collective insecurity focus less on political leaders than on culture and the mass media (Altheide 2002; Furedi 2002; Glassner 1999), no compelling framework is currently available to explore the politics of insecurity in advanced industrial societies.

A major aspect of the existing literature on the social construction of insecurity is to argue that citizens are “afraid of the wrong things” (Glassner 1999; Furedi 2002).² Although it is grounded in the same assumption, Corey Robin’s book *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*, (2004) is more relevant for the analysis of the politics of insecurity. Robin explores the history of the idea of fear in modern political theory. Through an analysis of McCarthyism and contemporary labour relations, his book also argues that “repressive fear” is an enduring tool of economic and political domination in the United States. For Robin, US civil society and political institutions are instrumental in creating and reproducing such “repressive fear.” As opposed to the idea that the fragmentation of political power is always a source of freedom, he shows that institutional fragmentation and autonomous civic organizations can work together to bring “repressive fear” upon society. Unfortunately, Robin reduces the politics of collective insecurity to “repressive fear,” as if the state could not effectively reduce collective insecurity through the implementation of effective public policies ranging from policing to social welfare and environmental protection. Arguing that politicians systematically attempt to increase collective insecurity in order to boost their power does not tell the whole story about the politics of insecurity. For example, during the early days of the British debate over BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy), conservative officials attempted to reduce the level of environmental insecurity by stating that BSE did not constitute a public health threat (Leiss and Powell 2004; Smith 2004). More importantly, Robin’s account does not say much about the relationship between fear and electoral politics. Even during historical repressive moments like McCarthyism, politicians seek election and re-election. What is the relationship between fear and electoral politics? How do politicians use and respond to fear and insecurity in order to increase their popular support? The main objective of this article is to help answer these questions by formulating a theoretical framework for the analysis of the politics of insecurity.³ Explora-

2 On the construction of fear see also, Altheide (2002).

3 Other scholars have stressed the relevance of fear and insecurity for political decision-makers and public policy: Altheide (2002; 2006); Ericson and Haggerty (1997).

tory in nature, this article does not provide final answers to such questions but offers a set of theoretical remarks that may guide future scholarship about this major issue.

Two parts comprise this article. The first part defines the concept of collective insecurity. The second part is much longer, and it formulates an integrated framework for the analysis of the political construction of collective insecurity in advanced industrial societies. Starting from the assumption that political leaders help shape the perception of collective threats despite the existence of enduring structural constraints, this discussion articulates five main claims. First, although interesting, the concept of moral panic is problematic, because it applies only to a limited range of insecurity episodes. The “threat infrastructure” of a particular policy helps explain if an episode takes the form of a genuine panic, and if this episode possesses a clear moral overtone. Second, citizens of contemporary societies exhibit acute risk awareness and, when new collective threats emerge, the logic of “organized irresponsibility” (Beck 1992) leads citizens and interest groups to blame elected officials for “bad news.” Third, political leaders mobilize credit claiming and blame avoidance strategies to respond to—and affect the perception of—collective threats in a way that enhances their position within the political field. Fourth, powerful interests and institutional forces as well as the “threat infrastructure” specific to a policy area create constraints and opportunities for these strategic actors involved in the construction of insecurity. Finally, behaviour is proactive or reactive: political leaders can either help push a threat onto the agenda early, or, at a later stage, simply attempt to shape public perception after other forces have transformed the threat into a major social and political issue. Overall, the article stresses that political leaders are often instrumental in shaping the perception of collective threats.

Taken individually, several of the above claims can be found in existing sociology and political science literatures. This contribution combines them in an integrated framework, bridging streams of scholarship that are too rarely discussed together in current debates on the politics of insecurity. For example, students of risk society and “organized irresponsibility” rarely draw upon the literature on blame avoidance.⁴ This is unfortunate, as Ulrich Beck’s concept of “organized irresponsibility” takes a much broader meaning when discussed in relationship with blame avoidance strategies. The present article, following the syncretic example of books like *Dynamics of Contention* (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), breaks boundaries between existing sub-fields and scholarly literatures to create a framework for the systematic analysis of a major type of politics (i.e., contentious politics, the politics of insecurity). Introducing the concept of “threat infrastructure” to the political sociology literature makes this framework more than an “original synthesis.” It enriches the constructivist

4 For notable exceptions see Altheide (2002) and Hier (2002).

perspective on collective insecurity by emphasizing the analytical distinction between the structural and the constructed aspects of the collective threats at the centre of the politics of insecurity.⁵ The article offers original definitions of major central concepts like collective insecurity and state protection and represents a step forward in the elaboration of a political sociology of collective insecurity in advanced industrial societies.

Defining Insecurity

Before sketching a theoretical framework for the construction of collective insecurity, one must clarify the meaning of this concept. Insecurity refers both to the subjective feeling of anxiety and to the concrete lack of protection. This definition from the *Collins Concise Dictionary Plus* illustrates the dual meaning of the word insecure, from which the term insecurity is derived: "(1) anxious or afraid, not confident or certain; (2) not adequately protected."⁶ The definition used through this article combines these two aspects of insecurity: "the state of fear or anxiety stemming from a concrete or alleged lack of protection." The focus is on collective insecurity, which affects particular segments of the population or even society as a whole.

The starting point of this analysis is that collective insecurity is a social and political construction. Far from meaning that people live in a world of pure illusions, the idea of social and political construction of reality refers to the manner in which actors collectively make sense of the world in which they live.⁷ Although individuals experience fear and anxiety in everyday life, collective insecurity involves transforming personal or environmental matters into social and political issues.⁸ As the psychological literature on "risk amplification" suggests, collective insecurity is "the product of processes by which groups and individuals learn to acquire or create *interpretations of risk*. These interpretations provide rules for selecting, ordering, and explaining signals emanating from [the environment]" (Kasperson et al. 2003: 15).⁹ Once perceived sources of insecurity are defined as collective problems affecting a significant segment of the population, they can enter the policy agenda. The analytical

5 For a critical discussion on the "constructivist" and the "realist" perspectives in risk analysis see Taylor-Gooby and Zinn (2006).

6 For a discussion about the meaning of insecurity, see Orsberg (1998).

7 On the concept of social construction see Berger and Luckmann (1967) and Douglas (1992).

8 To a certain extent, this is what Wright Mills (1959) labelled "sociological imagination."

9 At least three recent books on collective insecurity formulate a similar claim about the construction of collective insecurity: Altheide (2002, 2006) and Furedi (2002).

framework sketched below focuses on agenda setting and how political leaders both construct and respond to the forms of collective insecurity that move in and out of the policy agenda.

Although recognizing that collective insecurity is a social construction, the sociological and political analysis of insecurity must pay serious attention to the structural characteristics of the collective threats featured in the politics of insecurity. This means that there is a “threat infrastructure” to the politics of insecurity because the nature of collective threats creates constraints and opportunities for political leaders. “Threat infrastructure” can be defined as the nature of the risks that characterize a policy area, and, by extension, the basic political conditions that are likely to stem from such risks.¹⁰ Consequently, each domain of state protection exhibits a distinct set of political opportunities and constraints related to the nature of the threat under consideration. For example, highly episodic threats such as terrorism are more likely to generate panic waves than more structural sources of insecurity like unemployment or, as in the United States, the lack of health care coverage. Episodic and dramatic threats may stimulate more sweeping legislative actions than low profile risks like environmental hazards that have yet to be publicly defined as a major danger to human life. Because particular threats, such as unemployment, are closer to the everyday life of citizens, the potential level of political manipulation surrounding their social and political definition may be reduced. The constructivist analysis of collective insecurity must include an examination of the “threat infrastructure” specific to the policy area under consideration, which does not mean that this infrastructure entirely determines the shape that collective insecurity will take. Amidst structural constraints, it is clear that political leaders often play a major role in shaping the perception of collective threats (Béland, 2007).

The concept of “threat infrastructure” helps draw an analytical line between the structural and the constructed aspects of the threats citizens face and points to the concrete characteristics of each collective threat and policy area. These characteristics include threat stability (episodic versus constant threats), distance (immediate versus remote threats), visibility (prominent versus low-profile threats), and origin (human-made, natural, or hybrid threats). Consequently, the concept of “threat infrastructure” points to the structural elements that actors involved in the construction of insecurity generally take into account. Yet, even these structural elements are subject to the framing processes that affect the perception of collective threats. This is why we can say that the concrete nature of threat does not fully determine the political dynamic

¹⁰ For a discussion on the *political* differences between particular threats see Birkland (1997). Unfortunately, Birkland’s book deals exclusively with natural disasters, and it does not say much about the construction of collective insecurity surrounding them. On the differences between types of threats see also Beck (2002).

inherent in the politics of insecurity. The constructivist perspective is compatible with the claim that collective threats have a structural foundation, and the concept of “threat infrastructure” enriches such a perspective. Although collective threats are largely the product of the framing processes and the political strategies defined below, the concept of “threat infrastructure” reminds scholars that threats have a concrete basis that affects how political leaders mobilize over — and help shape the perception of — these threats.

Implicitly, this concept also points to the high level of institutional fragmentation that characterizes modern state protection, which deals with a growing number of threats. Analytically distinct from other state missions like fiscal extraction, state protection refers to policy interventions that attempt to reduce collective insecurity by fighting economic, environmental, and security threats. Major areas of state protection include policing, social security, and environmental protection (Béland 2007). State protection is the product of policy choices that involve significant trade-offs concerning issues ranging from personal freedom to the allocation of limited fiscal resources, for example (Gibbs Van Brunschot and Kennedy, 2007).

The following discussion is grounded in the assumption that the politics of insecurity shares major characteristics across different areas of state protection. Yet, scholars should keep in mind that the nature of the “threat infrastructure” varies from one policy area to another, and that the political and sociological analysis of collective insecurity must always take such variations into account.

The Politics of Insecurity

This section draws upon distinct streams of sociological and political science literature to sketch a framework for the study of the politics of insecurity. Dealing with the scholarship on moral panic, the first sub-section argues that many types of collective insecurity are not conducive to panic episodes. This is especially true when the nature of the threat (i.e., the “threat infrastructure”) is more structural than episodic. Overall, this section suggests that the concept of moral panic is problematic and should be used with caution. The second sub-section discusses Beck’s theory of risk society. Beck stresses two crucial issues that contribute to our understanding of the politics of insecurity in contemporary societies. First, the acute risk awareness that characterizes our historical era is emphasized. Second, the concept of “organized irresponsibility” points to the important fact that elected officials are now frequently blamed for accidents and other “bad news” not under their direct control. The third sub-section builds on these arguments to explore the two types of strategies political leaders mobilize in the context of the politics of insecurity: credit claiming

and blame avoidance. Sub-section four shows how formal political institutions and feedback effects from existing policies affect these strategies. The final sub-section discusses the role of agenda setting and framing in the political construction of insecurity. This culminates in an analysis of the distinction between proactive and reactive behaviour, which helps classify political strategies surrounding the construction of collective insecurity

Moral Panic

The concept of moral panic is central to contemporary sociological debates on collective insecurity. This makes it appropriate to begin the theoretical discussion about the politics of insecurity with a critical assessment of the literature on moral panic.¹¹

In 1971, British sociologist Jock Young made the first published reference to moral panic in a book chapter about drug abuse and policing in the United Kingdom (Young 1971).¹² The first author to use this concept in a systematic way was Stanley Cohen in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. Cohen (1972: 28) explains how moral panics occur.

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; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. 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, except in folklore and collective memory; 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.

Frequently cited, this paragraph is the starting point of the scholarship on moral panic. Elsewhere in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen defines “folk devils” as deviant individuals who are a direct threat to social order. Largely because the media tend to exaggerate the scope of this threat, “folk devils” are seen as a major source of collective insecurity. Cohen shows how British Members of Parliament reacted swiftly to dramatic media stories about youth delinquency by calling for stricter law enforcement and harsher sentences. A consensus among the political class emerged to condemn the teenager “folk devils” and

11 For an extended discussion of the concept of moral panic see McRobbie and Thornton (1996) and Ungar (2001).

12 On the history of the concept of moral panic see Thompson (1998: 7) and Critcher (2003: 9–30).

reinforce social order through the enactment of symbolic legislation against delinquency. "To align oneself symbolically with the angels, one had to pick on an easy target; the fact that the target hardly existed was irrelevant; it could be, and already had been, defined" (Cohen, 1972: 138). By stressing the role of the mass media in the construction of collective insecurity, Cohen and his followers made a significant contribution to the scholarly literature. Over the last three decades, an increasing number of studies about moral panic have explored issues as different as drug abuse and flag burning in a way that stresses the social and political construction of insecurity in contemporary societies.¹³

Although insightful, the concept of moral panic has major limitations. The best way to consider these limitations is to review the main characteristics of moral panics formulated by Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda in their widely cited book on the topic. For these two authors, moral panics have five essential characteristics:

First, there must be a heightened level of *concern over* the behaviour of a certain group or category and the consequences that that behaviour presumably causes for the rest of society.... Second, there must be an increased level of hostility toward the group or category regarded as engaging in the behaviour in question.... Third, there must be substantial or widespread agreement or consensus ... that the threat is real, serious and caused by the wrongdoing group members and their behaviour.... Fourth, there is the implicit assumption in the use of the term moral panic that there is a sense on the part of many members of society that a more sizable number of individuals are engaged in the behaviour in question than actually are, and the threat, damage and danger, or damage said to be caused by the behaviour is far more substantial ... [than a realistic evaluation would suggest]. And fifth, by their very nature, moral panics are *volatile*; they erupt fairly suddenly (although they may lie dormant or latent for long periods of time, and may reappear from time to time and, nearly as suddenly, subside). (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994: 33–38)

These features can limit the relevance of the concept of moral panic for the general analysis of the politics of insecurity. First, some forms of collective insecurity cannot be directly attributed to "a certain group or category." If it is easy to depict murder or terrorism as the product of "folk devils," it is more difficult to attribute high unemployment or environmental problems like global warming to a single group or individual. Politicians are frequently blamed for events and processes for which they are not directly responsible. Second, although moral panic scholars are right to stress the fact that many threats are amplified or even fabricated, few students of insecurity would argue that this is always the case. In fact, many significant threats can go undetected (Clarke 2006) and attempts are regularly made to downplay or even hide potential

13 For other, more recent, examples of moral panic studies see Jenkins (1992) and Welch (2000).

threats from the public. If politicians at times exploit insecurity and inflate threats, they sometimes downplay them, especially when they are far from the public's eye. The pre-1996 British debate over BSE mentioned above is an example of this. Third, some forms of collective insecurity experienced by citizens in their everyday lives have no explicit moral meaning. These consist of technological and scientific risks that exist beyond "right" and "wrong." Fourth, contrary to what the idea of moral panic may suggest, socially constructed forms of insecurity are not always episodic in nature. Some — for example, those related to structural unemployment or epidemic diseases like AIDS — can last for years or even decades. Moreover, intense political debates about insecurity do not necessarily focus on panic reactions. In the area of social policy, for example, the debate over health care coverage in the United States during the 1992 presidential campaign and the beginning of the Clinton presidency was not a panic episode in the strict sense of the term (e.g., Hacker 1997). This relates to the "threat infrastructure"; in this policy area, threats are relatively constant and slow moving rather than episodic in nature (i.e., decline in health insurance coverage is gradual and seldom related to spectacular media images). Such a "threat infrastructure" is less conducive to panic reactions than those of terrorism or sudden environmental catastrophes. Fifth, as sociologist Lee Clarke points out, the use of the term "panic" to label an episode of collective insecurity is often problematic. This is true because many studies have shown that, even when dealing with worst-case disasters, most citizens hardly panic at all (Clarke 2006). Although genuine panic episodes can occur from time to time, they are probably rarer than what the moral panic literature suggests. Finally, even when one believes that a panic episode may have occurred, it is generally hard to gather strong evidence to confirm this belief (Ungar 2001: 279).

Risk Society and "Organized Irresponsibility"

Ulrich Beck's theory of risk society improves our understanding of the politics of insecurity in contemporary societies. It offers crucial insight into the nature of collective insecurity in these societies, and about the relationship between politics and insecurity.

Beck (1998:10) formulated the concept of risk society as a response to the emergence of new environmental hazards stemming from human activities: "Risk society begins where nature ends.... This is where we switch the focus of our anxieties from what nature can do to us to what we have done to nature." For Beck (1998:10), the notion of risk emerges in a world "characterized by the loss of a clear distinction between nature and culture." Anxiety about environmental risks has become a central issue and a major source of solidarity in contemporary societies, replacing equality as the foundation of social order.

In the risk society, safety becomes the main social and political goal (Beck 1992). Despite the fact that Beck underestimates the central role of insecurity in traditional and early modern societies, he is right to argue that citizens have now become more aware of the potential risks associated with scientific and technological change (e.g. Mehta 1997). Acute risk awareness has serious political consequences, increasing the reliance on state experts and decision makers to evaluate and fight older and newer threats. As Anthony Giddens points out, risk awareness is closely related to trust; citizens have to place their confidence in experts and civil servants (whom they rarely know personally) to fight environmental threats that seem overwhelming to them (Giddens 1990).

For Beck, acute risk awareness is not the only crucial aspect of the politics of insecurity. In contemporary societies, “organized irresponsibility” affects politics in a direct manner. The concept of “organized irresponsibility” refers to the fact that it is hard to assign responsibility for most environmental problems (i.e., pollution and disasters): “Risks are no longer attributable to external agency.... Society becomes a laboratory, but there is no one responsible for its outcomes” (Beck 1998: 14). Although this image is excessive, one can acknowledge that those who generate environmental hazards (for example, private firms) are often better protected against pain than ordinary citizens facing the direct consequences of pollution and environmental disasters. Because these consequences affect everyone, collective insecurity related to perceived environmental risks is widespread. As it can be difficult to identify the origin of such disasters, politicians are “made responsible for decisions they didn’t take and for consequences and threats they know nothing about” (Beck 1998: 14). When disasters happen, elected officials are blamed for things that are not necessarily under their direct control.

The idea that politicians are blamed for a large number of unwanted phenomena extends far beyond environmental issues. For example, when employers terminate private pension plans, the public and labour unions may call the state for help and, in cases of inaction, blame politicians who fail to support new regulations or social programs. This example points to another of Beck’s arguments:

[The fact that] previously depoliticized areas of decision-making are getting politicized through the perception of risk, and must be opened to public scrutiny and debate. Corporate economic decisions, scientific research agendas, plans for the development and deployment of new technologies must all be opened up to a generalized process of discussion, and a legal and institutional framework for their democratic legitimation must be developed. (1998: 21)

The expansion of state protection over the last two centuries means that elected officials and civil servants deal with an increasing number of economic, social, and environmental issues that can exacerbate the *political* risks they face. This

situation further increases the need for blame avoidance strategies, a concept that is seldom used in the literature on risk society,¹⁴ although it is a major analytical tool for the analysis of the politics of insecurity. Although the risk society literature is insightful, a systematic analysis of the politics of insecurity requires a more detailed understanding of the strategies affecting the construction of collective insecurity across policy areas. Such an analysis also requires moving away from Beck's "realist" assumptions (i.e. his lack of emphasis on the social construction of risks) by focusing on agenda-setting and framing processes.¹⁵ The next sections outline a broad institutionalist framework for the analysis of the politics of insecurity.

Blame Avoidance and Credit Claiming

In liberal democracies, politicians pursue at least four main goals within the political field (i.e., the structured arena of political competition).¹⁶ First, they seek election and re-election. Second, once elected, they attempt to increase their institutional power within their party or government. Third, they seek to build a political legacy that could make them look good to their contemporaries and to future generations. Fourth, in some contexts, politicians promote an ideological agenda or a certain vision of "public interest" in a manner that may prove unpopular and, consequently, detrimental to their ability to attain the first three goals. To reach these goals, political leaders pursue credit claiming and blame avoidance strategies.

Credit claiming refers to the way politicians claim responsibility for "good news" such as full employment, reduction in crime rates, or the enactment of popular environmental legislation.¹⁷ In some cases, there is a traceable link between a political decision and specific economic, social, or environmental outcomes. For example, a new law could increase the level of unemployment benefits and thereby reduce poverty and economic insecurity. In other cases, the link between political decisions and economic, social, and environmental outcomes is problematic at best. Elected officials can claim credit for eco-

14 What Beck describes as acute risk awareness and "organized irresponsibility" are not incompatible with the concept of moral panic. As Sean Hier argues, growing risk awareness does not mean that moral panics become irrelevant: "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" (Hier 2003: 4). Deviance, insecurity, and new technologies may combine to create new episodes of moral panic that are linked to what Beck labels risk society.

15 On the "realist" aspect of Beck's early work on risk society see Taylor-Gooby and Zinn (2006).

16 On the concept of political field, see Bourdieu (1991).

17 David Mayhew (1974) is the first author who theorized credit claiming through an analysis of US congressional politics.

conomic recovery despite the fact that the relationship between this “good news” and the policies they supported is hard to establish. Overall, politicians attempt to claim credit for most “good news,” even when their responsibility for such events seems limited. Because the political field is an arena of competition, credit claiming may stimulate debate over who is truly responsible for the “good news.” Is it the current government or the previous one? Is the “good news” really tied to recent — or not so recent — political decisions? Political opponents can argue that those in power exaggerate the scope of the “good news” in order to gain more electoral support. Is the “good news” as good as those in power argue? Could the news have been even better if other measures had been enacted in the first place? These are the types of questions that can emerge in political struggles over credit claiming. Such struggles are present across all policy areas, including those related to state protection and the politics of insecurity. For example, elected officials can claim credit for an increase in private pension coverage after the enactment of new tax credits, or for the absence of terrorist attacks on the state’s territory after beefing up the intelligence and national security apparatuses.

Although widely in evidence across time and policy areas, credit claiming is probably less central to the politics of insecurity than blame avoidance, which is usually related to “bad news” that exacerbates economic, social, and environmental insecurity. “Bad news” may take the form of higher crime rates, terrorist attacks, increased unemployment, or environmental disasters. Such “bad news” can generate *political* risks because, as Beck suggests, elected officials are regularly blamed for “bad news” even when it cannot be directly traced to their decisions. Even if other actors in society are seen as being responsible for a negative situation, citizens may still blame elected officials and civil servants for their inability — or unwillingness — to prevent this situation and/or punish those who created it in the first place. For example, voters and interest groups may blame elected officials for unemployment resulting from downsizing and restructuring in the private sector. This shows that the logic of “organized irresponsibility” can be seen outside of the environmental sector. Furthermore, in policy areas where there is a close relationship between public and private institutions, it is easier for citizens to blame a central agent such as the state than to mobilize against a myriad of private actors. Moreover, in periods of fiscal austerity, unpopular fiscal measures designed to balance the budget and restructure state protection also constitute “bad news” that can generate criticism of elected officials. In addition to coping with the blame associated with economic, social, and environmental problems, these elected officials must shield themselves from blame stemming from their own decisions. Since the 1980s, the dominance of neoliberalism and new fiscal imperatives have increased the political risks elected officials in advanced industrial societies face because they sometimes feel obliged to adopt unpopular measures

in order to fight budget deficits. Cutbacks and their negative consequences on state protection are a major source of political blame in contemporary societies (Pierson 1994).

Because today's elected officials are exposed to so much blame, they have developed a complex array of strategies to prevent, deflect, and/or delay blame generated by "bad news." In a seminal article, R. Kent Weaver (1986: 385) distinguishes no fewer than eight major blame-avoidance strategies. Although these are discussed exclusively in the context of US policymaking, they illustrate the diversity of the tactics used by political leaders to avoid blame stemming from actual or anticipated "bad news":

1. agenda limitation (avoiding potentially unpopular proposals);
2. redefining the issue (framing less controversial proposals);
3. throwing good money after bad (preventing major constituencies from suffering losses);
4. passing the buck (forcing other political leaders to make the potentially harmful decisions);
5. finding a scapegoat (blaming others for unpopular measures and outcomes);
6. jumping on the bandwagon (support politically popular options);
7. circling the wagons (diffusing blame among many different actors); and,
8. "stop me before I kill again" (political leaders working against their own policy preferences in order to prevent blame generation situations).¹⁸

Beyond the unpopular political decisions Weaver writes about, some of these blame avoidance strategies are also used to shield elected officials from blame generated by environmental disasters or social and economic problems. Officials may blame economic cycles for an increase in unemployment to convince the public that their decisions did not cause the job losses and the related increase in social and economic insecurity. When a terrorist attack occurs, those in power may blame their predecessors for the gaps in the security apparatus that facilitated terrorist actions, as the Bush administration did in the aftermath of the events of September 11.¹⁹

In the context of the politics of insecurity, however, elected officials may pursue blame avoidance strategies that are not mentioned in Weaver's article. Downplaying the scope of the threats citizens face can be a politically ap-

18 Some of these strategies are strikingly similar to the "excuses" and "justifications" defined by Marvin B. Scott and Stamford M. Lyman in their seminal article (1968).

19 For example, Attorney General John Ashcroft did this in his testimony to the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (see Nagourney and Lichtblau 2004).

propriate blame avoidance strategy. This is especially true when threats are barely on the public's radar screen. Arguing that debated threats have been exaggerated legitimizes past and present inaction, which in turn shields elected officials from blame, at least in the short run. Inflating perceived threats also deflects blame away from politicians when their opponents depict their policy proposals as inappropriate or unacceptable. For example, President George W. Bush dramatized the threat that the Hussein regime posed to US national security in order to legitimize the 2003 invasion of Iraq (e.g., Barber 2003). Overall, elected officials attempt to shape the *perception* of economic, environmental, and security threats to promote their own agenda and interests. This issue is discussed further in the section on agenda-setting and framing processes.

Political Institutions and Policy Legacies

To understand the meaning of political strategies, it is necessary to place them in their particular institutional context. The historical institutionalist literature shows that formal political institutions, such as electoral rules, largely impact the behaviour of elected officials and interest groups (e.g., Immergut 1998; Skocpol 1992). The US Congressional system is more permeable to the direct influence of interest groups than the British parliamentary system, which affects the way interests affect policy outcomes. Electoral schedules set the time-frame in which candidates and elected officials deal with major policy issues. Finally, embedded constitutional rights and regulations create major opportunities and constraints for elected officials and other political leaders. The constitutional and institutional rules of the game affect the manner in which these actors deploy their credit claiming and blame avoidance strategies. In the US political system, checks and balances and the absence of strict party discipline in Congress help elected officials diffuse blame stemming from "bad news" and unpopular legislation. In countries like Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, party discipline and the greater concentration of legislative and executive power means that it is difficult for those forming the government to diffuse blame (Pierson and Weaver 1993). Power fragmentation in the United States discourages the enactment of bold legislative proposals in the absence of a perceived economic or political crisis. For that reason, political leaders and interest groups have a strong tendency to create a sense of crisis to promote their proposed policy solutions. Without this sense of crisis, inaction is probable because it is hard to build winning legislative coalitions in the absence of party discipline.²⁰ This stresses the possible relationship between the construction of insecurity (i.e., the sense of crisis) and the elaboration of electoral strategies (i.e., coalition building). Although less prominent, this relationship also exists in countries other than the US.

20 The author would like to thank John Myles for his insight about this issue.

In addition to formal rules and institutions, political leaders must take into account policy legacies and vested interests to create winning electoral and political strategies. From an institutionalist viewpoint, the concept of policy feedback is important to the understanding of the politics of insecurity. Policy feedback results from the political constraints and opportunities generated by well-established public policies. In his work on the “new politics of the welfare state,” Paul Pierson (1994) argues that large social programs like public pensions and national health insurance enacted in the post-war era have created powerful vested interests that generally prevent massive and unilateral attacks against these programs. Because they face major electoral risks related to these institutionalized interests, elected officials adopt blame avoidance strategies to implement neoliberal policy alternatives without losing too much political support (Pierson 1994). Vested interests in the private sector create the same kind of political constraints as policy legacies (e.g., Hacker 1997).²¹

Policy feedback and vested interests apply to all areas of state protection. However, variations in policy legacies are instrumental in explaining major differences from one area of state intervention to another. There are different vested interests between different policy areas — or even within the same policy area. Social policies that cover most or all citizens create powerful “armies of beneficiaries” that favour the preservation of these policies (Pierson, 1994), while environmental regulations generate weaker and less-defined constituencies that face the incessant lobbying of business interests opposed to such regulations. Institutional legacies and vested interests can strongly affect the politics of insecurity and the development of state protection. The nature of the threats that these policies deal with (i.e., their “threat infrastructure”) at least partially explains political variations from one area of state protection to another. Violent, spectacular, and highly episodic threats like terrorism are more likely to stimulate sweeping legislative actions than low profile environmental hazards that have not been publicly defined as a major danger for human life. Threats that attract media attention are more likely to generate political attention than low profile, less palpable issues that, in the long run, may prove far more dangerous to the well being of citizens.²² This also points to the timeframe referred to by experts and political leaders to assess threats. Short-term threats of a lesser scope like the debated presence of unsafe cars on the market may seem a more pressing issue for political leaders than major, long-term issues

21 Furthermore, national crises like the events of September 11 can empower security lobbies that seek to build up policing and surveillance apparatuses (Lyon 2003; Haggerty and Gazso 2005).

22 In the literature on risk perception and communication, the concept of “risk amplification” describes the process by which less hazardous risks can become the focus of social and political attention. Recent examples of “risk amplification” include issues like BSE and airplane crashes (Kasperson et al. 2003: 13–14). On risk perception and communication see also Slovic (2000).

like global warming. Finally, the social and political status of those affected by threats can affect policy outcomes. Economically and politically weak constituencies may find it difficult to gain comprehensive state protection against threats that mainly affect them in the first place. Policy legacies and the “threat infrastructure” affect the way political leaders build their strategies and respond to particular threats. This means that structural factors affect the social and political construction of collective insecurity.

Agenda Setting and Framing Processes

In addition to institutions and vested interests, ideas play a central role in the politics of insecurity as social and political leaders construct threats and policy responses to those threats. Analysis of such ideas should focus on agenda setting and framing. First, the concept of agenda refers to “the list of subjects or problems to which governmental officials, and people outside of government closely associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention at any given time” (Kingdon 1995: 3). Consequently, agenda setting is the process that narrows the “set of conceivable subjects to the set that actually becomes the focus of attention” (1995: 3). Political leaders can only focus on a few core issues simultaneously, so the construction and selection of the problems on the agenda constitute a key phase of the policymaking process.²³ As a result, beliefs about what the most pressing problems of the day are must be taken into account. Second, by framing the *perception* of threats, political leaders attempt to depict themselves as the best providers of collective protection. This is done to increase their popular support and shape a positive and lasting legacy.²⁴ For example, after September 11, President Bush depicted the world as a dangerous place, and military strength as the logical response to global terrorism (Barber 2003). Already implicit in the literature on moral panic, the construction of threats and insecurity through framing processes is a major aspect of the politics of insecurity.

Murray Edelman’s seminal work on symbolic politics points to the central role of framing processes in shaping collective perceptions and behaviours. “Government affects behaviour chiefly by shaping the cognitions of large numbers of people in ambiguous situations. It helps create their beliefs about what is proper; their perceptions of what is fact; and their expectations of what is to come” (Edelman 1971: 7). These remarks apply to the politics of insecurity, in which political leaders attempt to shape the perception of existing threats as part of their blame avoidance and credit claiming strategies. In this context,

23 On the social and political construction of policy problems see Rochefort and Cobb (1994).

24 A strategic and deliberate activity, framing concerns the formulation of a discourse to generate public support for specific actors and proposals (e.g., Campbell 1998).

a major aspect of framing processes involves a simplification of the threats and the policy responses they stimulate:

It is characteristic of large numbers of people in our society that they see and think in terms of stereotypes, personalization, and over-simplifications; that they cannot recognize or tolerate ambiguous and complex situations; and that they accordingly respond chiefly to symbols that over-simplify and distort. This form of behavior ... is especially likely to occur where there is insecurity occasioned by failure to adjust to real or perceived problems. (Edelman 1960: 699)

Consequently, framing processes surrounding blame avoidance and credit claiming strategies tend to offer a simplified view of both the threat and how the state is responding to it.

Although framing processes affect popular perceptions, political leaders do not have an unlimited degree of autonomy in constructing collective threats. First, as suggested above, constraints stemming from the “threat infrastructure” and the policy legacies that characterize each policy area can limit the ability of political leaders to shape the meaning of threats that have enduring, structural characteristics. Second, divergent voices are likely to question dominant frames before challenging the explanations provided by those in power. Sceptical citizens and journalists may organize to question sanctioned stories and force officials to provide new accounts of the situation in which they are involved (Tilly 2006: 174). To a certain extent, this is what occurred in the United States during the second mandate of President George W. Bush, whose credibility and popularity strongly declined in the face of the situation in Iraq and the seemingly inadequate federal response to Hurricane Katrina (Béland 2007).

When participating in the construction of collective threats, political leaders can adopt either proactive or reactive behaviour. Proactive behaviour characterizes political leaders who seek to increase attention towards a specific source of insecurity. This effort to exacerbate insecurity related to a particular policy area allows political leaders to initiate an episode of acute collective insecurity. The debate over crime and delinquency at the centre of the 2002 French presidential campaign is a typical example of politicians’ proactive behaviour in shifting attention towards a threat to which they claim to respond. In that case, right-wing candidates, like Jacques Chirac and Jean-Marie Le Pen, had a strong incentive to push crime and delinquency to the centre of the campaign because their party had long been associated with the restoration of “law and order” in France. This strategy put the leading left-wing candidate Lionel Jospin in a delicate situation. Ultimately, Chirac and Le Pen, and not Jospin, made it to the second round of the presidential election (Castel 2003; Cole 2002). A major episode of collective insecurity may also emerge independently from the actions of major political leaders who then attempt to

reframe this episode to their advantage. This reactive behaviour is clearly present in the case of the 1996 British BSE panic episode. After downplaying the potential public health threat for almost a decade, Conservatives were forced to acknowledge it and shift the blame away from themselves by accusing foreign countries of imposing an unfair ban on British beef (Brookes 1999). Reactive behaviour means that political leaders shape threat perception only in response to issues they have not pushed on the agenda in the first place. The complexities of the politics of insecurity are best understood by recognizing that both proactive and reactive strategies are involved.

Conclusion

The above discussion bridges several streams of scholarship in order to pave the road to the systematic analysis of the politics of insecurity in contemporary societies. The claims are not necessarily new, but, as a group, they form an integrated framework grounded in a dialogue between approaches and theoretical contributions that are seldom articulated together in the social science literature.

The constructivist framework advanced here articulates five major claims to guide future empirical analysis about the politics of insecurity. First, it stresses the limitations of the concept of moral panic, which applies only to a limited range of insecurity episodes. Turning to the “threat infrastructure” of a specific policy area helps explain why some episodes take the form of a panic while others do not. At the analytical level, the concept of “threat infrastructure” points to the complex relationship between the structural and the constructed aspects of the threats confronted by ordinary citizens and political leaders. Second, following Beck, citizens frequently blame politicians for problems for which they are not directly responsible. Third, in part because they are exposed to so much potential criticism, political leaders attempt to deflect blame when things turn bad while claiming credit for “good news.” This article stresses the relationship between “organized irresponsibility” and blame avoidance, two concepts that are seldom discussed together in the social science scholarship on politics and public policy. These concepts complement one another and future scholarship could benefit from drawing on both. Fourth, in framing blame avoidance and credit claiming strategies, political leaders face powerful vested interests and institutional forces that create major constraints and opportunities. If we add the weight of the “threat infrastructure” discussed above, the capacity of political leaders to shape the perception of, and benefit from, collective insecurity faces significant structural constraints. Finally, political strategies can take the form of proactive or reactive behaviour. Political leaders can either be instrumental in pushing a threat onto the

policy agenda (proactive behaviour) or simply attempt to affect the perception of this threat after other actors have helped transform it into a major political and social issue (reactive behaviour).

These five claims provide a more complex meaning to the idea that political leaders actively participate in the construction of collective insecurity. This should not be understood as a claim that such actors have unlimited control over shared perceptions of insecurity, but it is clear political leaders and strategies may carry much weight in the social construction of collective insecurity. Recognizing the central role of political leaders in the shaping of threats and even the propagation of fear should not hide the fact that the state does much to protect citizens from genuine threats that can have dramatic consequences on the life of citizens (Béland 2007). Furthermore, the strategies of these political leaders are generally influenced — but not entirely determined — by the “threat infrastructure” specific to each policy area.

In order to stimulate future research about the politics of insecurity, two cautionary notes about this contribution should be mentioned. First, this exploratory article does not offer definite answers regarding the relationship between the structural and the constructed components of collective threats and the politics of insecurity surrounding them. In order to formulate more systematic claims, empirical research is needed about the “threat infrastructure” and the political strategies related to collective insecurity. For example, scholars could compare the “threat infrastructure” of policy areas like policing, national security, environmental protection, and health policy in order to generate a comprehensive typology of threats. Following this logic, scholars could then further explore the relationship between this typology and the role played by political leaders in the construction of insecurity. This article stresses the tension between the structural and the constructed aspects of the politics of insecurity, and more research is needed to grasp fully such a crucial tension.

Second, the message of this article is not that collective insecurity is more present in contemporary societies than it was in the past.²⁵ In spite of sensationalist media coverage and growing risk awareness, there is no evidence that the general level of collective insecurity that citizens experience today is significantly higher than in the past; the increase in risk awareness may be offset by the expansion of state protection. However, even with higher life expectancy and a general increase in wealth and state protection, collective insecurity is still a crucial aspect of human life in contemporary societies. In the future, scholars could compare the transformation of the politics of insecurity at different historical stages to assess if the sense of collective insecurity is stronger today than in societies of the past.

25 Among the authors arguing that our society is exceptionally prompt to react to fear and insecurity, see Furedi (2003) and Tudor (2003).

Among the most pressing issues that require scholarly attention are the cross-national variations in the construction of insecurity. Most collective threats are becoming increasingly global in nature (Beck 2002); yet, national actors and institutions remain the focal point of contemporary politics (Campbell 2004). Future research could tackle this paradox while exploring the politics of insecurity from a comparative and historical perspective. In doing so, scholars will have to pay direct attention to the relationship between the “threat infrastructure” and the framing strategies of political leaders, as well as the reaction of citizens to global threats and the political discourse surrounding these threats. Another interesting issue scholars could tackle is the extent to which the framework developed in this article in reference to advanced industrial societies applies to countries of the Global South. Beyond these specific issues, it is clear that the analysis of the political strategies related to the construction of insecurity is necessary to understand some of the most debated political issues of our time.

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