

S C R I P T

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Panel: “Knowing the Future: Policy and the Production of Anticipation”

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Ultranegative: Security, Anxiety, and the Production of Violent Policy

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Thanks to Peter & Christina for organizing this panel.

I’m going to speak, briefly, on behalf of Mark Maguire and myself. I’d like to suggest that “the future” as it is conceived in counterterrorism – and as we discuss in our book, *Getting Through Security: Counterterrorism, Bureaucracy and a Sense of the Modern*,¹ is a rather different beast from “the future” under consideration in other present situations, and by other members of this panel. Light lifting, actually.

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¹ Mark Maguire & David A. Westbrook, [Getting Through Security: Counterterrorism, Bureaucracy, and a Sense of the Modern](#), (Routledge 2020).

Let me start by painting a rather general picture of “Policy and the Production of Anticipation,” which will allow me to show counterterrorism, a species of violent policy, in contrast.

This panel occurs in the wake of the recent Conference of the Parties (to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) in Glasgow, bizarrely known by its acronym, COP26, which may already suggest some of the difficulties. These days, “the future” is a bit suffocatingly omnipresent. Predictions of future situations of various level of certainty and under different circumstances, and with lengthy chains of possible consequences, carefully parsed by scientists, are squashed – that’s the term of art – by politicians and journalists into concrete, present facts. So, we already see one of the central preoccupations of this panel, a presumption that does not rise to the level of epistemological claim that some future situation, arrangement, can be known, now, and distinguished from other conceivable arrangements.

As presumptions or claims go, this seems wildly optimistic. The future is often pretty uncertain, as Covid-19 reminds us. If usually foreseeable, even the near future is hard to predict with any accuracy, as sports and politics remind us.

“The future” with which this panel is concerned, however, is more of an instrumentality, often a necessary one, than a prediction. Humans plan, or have since farmers started storing seeds for next year. But storing seeds happens now. So “the future” becomes a way of arguing about what to do, now, that is, the future

is also a form of politics, as COP26 amply demonstrated. Such politics is, of course, another preoccupation of the panel.

The earth may have one fate, but politics is not singular. If we understand “the future” we work with today as a function of different politics, we might speak of different futures, now. The future, then, becomes still less of an inquiry, much less a fact, but a discursive ring in which different views are contested, with the usual alliances and interests, and the facts to be determined in the sweet by and by, as also demonstrated by COP26.² This is true even for futures unanticipated – note the use of Covid to expand the authority of human relations departments, and just what, as a matter of law, is a mandate, anyway?

Some years ago, the late Paul Rabinow and company noted both the uncertainty of any discussion of the future, and the tendency for talk of “the future” to say much about the speaker.³ With the customary references to Foucault and the like, Rabinow turned his attention from “the future” to those charged with its present articulation. Rabinow even did this in the context of security, specifically biosecurity. The early 21st century saw increased anxiety about the dangers of biological technology, occasioned by the collapse of the Soviet Union’s regulatory regime and by advances in the technology, particularly the accessibility, of biological weaponry. Such anxiety has now increased again, with worries about Covid coming from a lab, which may or may not have been the case, but nobody seems to deny the possibility in principle. Borrowing Niklas Luhman’s distinction

² See, e.g., Laura Forlano, [The Future is Not a Solution](#), 10.18.21.

³ Stephen J. Collier, Andrew Lakoff, Paul Rabinow, “Biosecurity: Towards an anthropology of the contemporary,” *Anthropology Today* vol. 20, No. 5, October 2004.

between danger and risk, the question was whether “the danger” of an unspecified threat could be specified, turned into a “risk,” which humans could address through this or that action. The authors call this a technology, the moving of something from the natural order to that of human agency, art, techne, collectively, policy. Fancy.

As an aside: one may understand the entirety of finance as the business of transforming an uncertain future into quantifiable, indeed priced, risk, but that would be another paper.

The point of ethnography, then, is to engage those who are doing the transforming, those who are making our (dangerous, uncertain, abstract) “future futures” into (risky, and risk addressing) “present futures.” Typically, Rabinow has a name for such study: “second order” ethnography, which he sees as central to the ethnography of the contemporary. Maybe it is: pretty much everybody on this panel has done something similar, generally less bookishly. Maybe this is just practical: you cannot interview the future, but you can talk to people who concern themselves with the not yet.

My coauthor Mark Maguire certainly did something like this in the ethnographies on which *Getting Through Security* is based. Terrorist attacks are very occasional, and often very fast, and besides, deadly. Hard to be in the moment. But you can study them after the fact, reconstruct them. And/or you can study the people who are charged with preventing and especially responding to such attacks, if they do come, that is, you can study counterterrorism operators.

In doing so, we found a few fundamental ways that the character of “the future” at issue in counterterrorism is different from futures constructed elsewhere.

First, in counterterrorism, “the production of anticipation” is based not on knowledge but a fear of violent chaos.

In many contexts “the future,” is presented as fairly tractable. Based on the available data and our understanding of the relevant trends, we think the world will look like X in time Y. This is COP26, central banking, all sorts of things. A great deal of effort is devoted to demonstrating the plausibility, even likelihood, of X in time Y, and the desirability and feasibility of various policies, Z1, Z2, etc., that either bring about or otherwise respond to that desired/anticipated state of the world.

In contrast, counterterrorism thinking tends to be ultra-negative. At issue is not what is likely to happen –terrorist attacks are highly unlikely in any given time and place – but what *might* happen. While we might anticipate some risks, terrorists are inventive. The security forces could fail, simply not being in the right place at the right time, or for any number of other reasons. Innocent people could die. This too happens.

As an enterprise, security is left to anticipate that which is feared but which perhaps cannot yet be named, because it has not happened, yet. And may never. Unless it does. Rather than move through data and plausibility in the direction of

reasonable confidence if not certainty, security thinking moves in the opposite direction, from a placid contemporary (a functioning airport, say) towards horrors (not yet) realized, but perhaps the time is upon us? Perhaps something was missed, in the endless reams of data? After 9/11, the security community was widely condemned for a “failure of imagination.”

Second, terrorist attacks are short, episodic, and highly unevenly spaced in time and place. Mark did a big study of the first “ten minutes” of several attacks. In warfare, nations militarize, diplomacy deteriorates. In the field, an army may be presumed if one encounters scouts. In contrast, the episodic attack is not the battle to come.

More generally, in most anticipatory contexts, the future is imagined as an ongoing process. Trends develop; things emerge. We might see ourselves as in a car on a dark night, the future spooling towards us like the road, or gliding down a ski slope, with the distant becoming closer. We come to know “what lies ahead.” Not so in counterterrorism

Third, and in consequence of the second point:

In many contexts, to come to know means that our knowledge improves. What was mere speculation (“in three years X) will be a fact, or not, in just three years. The models get better. The data get more precise. It is easier to see into the near term.

In the case of counterterrorism, not so much. The day after an attack we do not know more about the next attack, or whether there will be one. There will be a post-mortem, and lessons will be learned, but the fundamental situation – vulnerability to some attack, somehow – will not change. One attack does not mean another one is not coming. Nor does it say anything about where, when, or how such an attack might be carried out. Or not.

Fourth, professional obsessions.

As a result, the security community is compelled to play endless games of castles and cannons, to adopt “paranoia within reason” as an epistemological stance. The cockpit door could be breached by fanatics flying the plane into a building; cockpit doors could be hardened; a hardened door could facilitate a madman flying kids into a mountainside, the Germanwings disaster.

Fifth, political frustration. I started by talking about the future as a way of organizing political argument, today. Climate change means we must do this or that. To some extent, counterterrorism facilitates such policy, and we can see the results in, for example, the architecture of public spaces, notably airports.

At a deeper level, however, the future that counterterrorism fears is not desired (I will bracket darker arguments made in the book). Nor is security policy desired. Nobody wants, or should want, ever more intrusive security measures, ever more counterterrorist operatives.

More to the point, there is no final way to allay such fears. The game of castles and cannons, the arms race, does not end. It’s never enough.

Perhaps this is true of other goods – education or health care – but there seems to be no way to be satisfied with counterterrorism. In counterterrorism, we do not like the policies that we do enact, and simultaneously worry that such policies are insufficient. The future is intractable.

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So, to summarize counterterrorism’s “present future:”

The future is based on fear – a rather inchoate fear of violent chaos – rather than estimation or knowledge.

The future that counts is episodic, not smooth.

The future does not become more known; things are learned but knowledge does not progress.

The future is confronted with rational paranoia.

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Policy is inescapably frustrated, unsatisfying, because the future is intractable.

In sum, unlike most anticipatory projects, security discourse does not converge, either epistemologically or normatively, because its horizon is not the world as it is likely or desired to be, but the world as it is feared it might be imagined and enacted, by some adversary, somewhere.

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Let me close with two thoughts, one political, one intellectual.

As Mark and I have been suggesting for some time, ethnography stands outside professional discourse, of counterterrorism or what have you. Recall Rabinow’s second order ethnography, the engagement with, and the analysis of, those who make the future present for us, now. Third order ethnography might take conscious responsibility for the conversations it enables. Within the site, the ethnographer may offer perspective if not conclusions. Looking outward, it is just imaginable that third order ethnography may serve as a conduit for a public accounting of the security community’s bureaucratic exercises of power, if not actual democracy. Perhaps we might be able to articulate our fears, and our responses, to ourselves.

Second, the episodic character of terrorist attacks re-presents an intellectual challenge at the heart of the critical social sciences, for which the canonical example must be Durkheim’s *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. Surely the social matters, and yet cannot ever seem to fix the episodic, singular, aspects of

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individual human lives, either in time or place. The suicide, the suicide bomber, is announced by the deed; the science never quite predicts who, when, how.

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