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By Frank Furedi

Two consecutive posts from Spiked is a guaranteed never-to-be-repeated anomaly, but in this case chief ideologue Frank Furedi's oft-expounded 'politics of fear' line leads to an important point about the Malthusian basis of ecology's millennial crusade. (It's a point that's made all too rarely; for a more theoretically-informed version see the Iain Boal interview posted a few months back on this site.) 'Terrorism' serves as a sort of template for other official universal enemies: 'global warming', pandemics, 'overpopulation', etc. (And, coming full-circle, military Malthusians now explicitly cite terrorism alongside resource-shortage as a noxious consequence of profligate working class reproduction.) Furedi doesn't quite put it this way, but 'terror' is a useful starting point for perpetual emergency-management because the negligible real effect of the phenomenon and the total indeterminacy of the concept mean other fear-triggers can simultaneously be made to seem 'even' more dangerous (by comparison) and always already everywhere (by analogy). So that unlimited ad-hoc emergency powers become all the more 'necessary' and inevitable.

Frank Furedi

Meet the Malthusians manipulating the fear of terror

From climate change doom-mongers to population alarmists, every kind of fear entrepreneur is piggy-backing on the 'war on terrorism'.

The world economy may be a bit unsettled, but the global market in fear is prospering. This month, Lloyd's of London warned that climate change could destroy the insurance industry. It counselled insurers to increase prices in order to avoid being 'swept away' by a sea of claims. 'If we don't take action now to understand the changing nature of our planet, we will face extinction', declared Lloyd's director Rolf Tolle (1).

The insurance industry seems almost addicted to the idea that, in the future, it could become helpless in the face of global calamity. After 9/11 the focus was on terrorism. Then, Rodger Lawson, president of the Alliance of American Insurers, argued that 'terrorism is an uninsurable act' (2). To say that something is 'uninsurable' is to believe that it is beyond human management or control. The notion that society is incapable of managing certain risks through insurance points to a powerful sense of defeatism about the dangers ahead. And in this debate about our scary future, terrorism is only one of many terrible threats we apparently face. 'Life on Earth is at the ever-increasing risk of being wiped out by a disaster, such as sudden global warming, nuclear war, a genetically engineered virus or other dangers we have not yet thought of', said the famous physicist Stephen Hawking recently (3).

It is now common to hear people argue that the threat of terrorism is less worrying than other, more menacing dangers of the future. Earlier this year a report titled Global Risks 2006, published by the World Economic Forum, revealed that bird flu is the global threat that most concerns business leaders. The report claimed that the deadly H5N1 strain of avian flu could 'disrupt our global society and economy in an unprecedented way' (4). Last year, a report issued by the UK Cabinet Office rated avian flu as among the greatest threats facing the country, posing as big a danger to Britain as terrorism does (5).

Both the World Bank and the Pentagon have discussed reports which warn that climate change is a greater threat than terrorism. And recently a report published by the Oxford Research Group argued that 'international terrorism is actually a relatively minor threat when compared to other more serious global trends', such as climate change (6). Others accept these doom-laden arguments about global warming but raise the stakes further by claiming that, actually, overpopulation poses the principal

threat to life on Earth. In Britain, the Optimum Population Trust is devoted to promoting this kind of alarmist propaganda (7).

There is very little to distinguish between the claims and dire warnings made by various different doom-mongers, whether they are left or right, green or business-oriented. So environmentalist groups are quite happy to harness the security concerns of the Pentagon in order to advance their cause. Greenpeace International has embraced a report written for the Pentagon, which predicts that 'future wars will be fought over the issue of survival rather than religion, ideology or national honour' (8).

#### Expanding the 'security threat'

Competing claims about what constitutes the greatest threat to global security are an exercise in what sociologists call domain expansion. 'Once a problem gains widespread recognition and acceptance, there is a tendency to piggyback new claims on to the old name, to expand the problem's domain', writes the sociologist Joel Best (9). In other words, once terrorism and security have been defined as big problems that require serious attention, other claim-makers can appropriate these concerns to serve their own interests. Various different problems are now repackaged as 'global threats'. 'The initial claims become a foot in the door, an opening wedge for further advocacy', says Best. Anxieties about international terrorism are not only mobilised to promote the 'war on terror' – they are also activated to highlight issues that have little to do with terrorists. So when a recent report concluded that the spread of HIV is 'as big of a threat as terrorism', it was drawing on the cultural script of the post-9/11 era (10). Other fear entrepreneurs have presented poverty reduction as being indispensable in the broader fight against international terrorism (11).

The Worldwatch Institute, a green-leaning research institute, borrows from Washington's anti-terrorist agenda in an attempt to boost its own objectives. In its post-9/11 statement 'Bioterror in your burger', it noted that although past attempts to clean up America's food chain have 'failed to inspire politicians', a patriotic attempt for homeland security could 'finally lead to meaningful action'. In its report *Climate Change Poses Greater Security Threat Than Terrorism*, it argued that 'the parallels with terrorism are compelling', adding: '[A]s with terrorism, we know that changes will occur, but not when or where they will strike.' (12) Here, that well-known Homeland Security soundbite 'the question is not if, but when...' is adapted and recycled as a statement about the imminent threat posed by climate change.

Many fear entrepreneurs now use the rhetorical device of drawing parallels between their own issues and terrorism. A report on disease pandemics published by the Australian Homeland Security Research Centre argued that 'pandemics are like terrorism – both are probable but no-one knows when [they will occur], or what their consequences will be' (13). Here we can see how uncertainty about the future can be recast as an immediate security problem in the here and now.

Through this rhetorical expansion of the meaning of security, terrorism has become the benchmark by which all other threats are measured. In effect, terrorism is now the idiom for spreading anxiety about numerous issues. So in November 2003, then UK health minister Rosie Winterton informed an international meeting of her counterparts that 'recent events have shown that terrorist attacks and natural disasters can happen anywhere and at any time, and that all our citizens are potentially at risk' (14). The ease with which Winterton made a conceptual jump from the spectre of terrorism to the threat of natural disasters reveals much about the contemporary imagination. The public's concern about terror has become a kind of resource which can be mobilised for giving other threats greater definition.

A central element of all this ‘domain expansion’ is the argument that certain calamities will cause more casualties than terrorism does. The Worldwatch Institute claims: ‘Climate change already claims more lives than terrorism, according to the World Health Organisation.’ The Institute repeats the figure of 160,000 deaths caused by climate change per year, in order to underline the incredible power of this threat. With climate change apparently causing such large numbers of casualties, terrorism can appear almost benign by comparison.

### Population alarmists

Population control is another area where advocacy groups have attempted to piggyback their claims on the security agenda. Since the Seventies advocates of population control have been on the defensive (15). The traditional Malthusian argument that food production could not keep up with population growth had been discredited over the previous century. As a result, the Malthusian movement has sought out new arguments to justify its objective of population control – and in recent years it has tried to win support by claiming that population growth is the root cause of global insecurity and terrorism. Thus, the Malthusian fantasy about a ‘population bomb’ has been recycled in a new form. According to this simplistic scenario, overpopulation creates a lot of poor, unemployed, discontented men; many of them turn into troublemakers; some of them become cannon fodder for terrorist networks, and they end up on the wrong side of the ‘war on terror’.

In the Seventies, Paul Ehrlich, author of *The Population Bomb* argued that population growth in the South inexorably led to the triumph of communism. Today he has recycled that simplistic diagnosis to account for the rise of international terror. He argues that demographic factors are ‘likely contributors’ to terrorism. Why? Because the ‘vast majority of terrorists are young males’ and there are ‘huge numbers of boys under 15’ who live in Muslim nations (16).

The idea that large numbers of young males = potential terror threat is systematically promoted by supporters of population control. ‘It is impossible to ignore the link between rapid population growth and terrorism’, argues the director of the Population Coalition (17). In reality, the link is based on a simpleton’s logic, which says that because population growth and terrorism happen to coincide they must be linked. From this view, anything that coincides with current demographic patterns – Hurricane Katrina, the property boom in London, the popularity of iPods – must be linked to population growth.

Prominent Malthusian organisations, including the Worldwatch Institute and the Population Institute, are reposing population control as an effective counter-terrorist measure. The Population Institute’s study *Breeding Insecurity: Global Security Implications Of Rapid Population Growth* argues that ‘rapid population growth in developing countries creates national security problems, including civil unrest and terrorism’ (18). The report cites a study by another Malthusian group, Population Action International, which claims that ‘youth bulges create instability and increase the likelihood for terrorism and civil unrest by as much as 50 per cent’ (19).

Fifty per cent might sound like a big number – but don’t worry, it is a made-up figure, the figment of an imagination fixated on constructing a relationship between demographic growth and terrorism. The obvious conclusion to be drawn from the Malthusian’s new arguments is that the threat of terrorism can be halved if we implement a vigorous programme of population control. In short, the solution to terrorism is to stop people over there from breeding. As the Population Institute’s report concludes: ‘[W]hile family planning programmes will not create a more secure world on their own, they will go a long way towards reducing pressures on societies that lead to instability, unrest and terrorism.’ (20)

## A new security agenda

The linking of human fertility with the danger of terrorism shows the rise of a new and expanded concept of security. Since the end of the Cold War, the meaning of security has been challenged by critics who argue that the threats faced by society are no longer confined to that traditional paradigm of national security. Instead, threats are said to be diffuse and transnational. From this perspective, threats are not simply the result of actions that intentionally seek to undermine national security, for example actions carried out by terrorists or drug traffickers – rather, threats to security are also the unintended consequence of human action itself. The new spectre of transnational threats raised by today's fear entrepreneurs – from population growth to environmental degradation, climate change to water shortage – all result from human behaviour.

According to the traditional view of national security, threats to society were caused by national rivalries, expansionist governments or ideological competition. The new security agenda shifts the focus from the geopolitical domain to the environmental domain. It is underpinned by a powerful sense of environmental determinism, which sees environmental degradation and diminishing natural resources as the principal threat to global security. According to the Oxford Research Group, climate change and a variety of associated natural disasters threaten global survival itself. Moreover, competition for natural resources such as oil and water apparently threaten to intensify conflict (21). All of these threats are transnational. But why should we describe them as a 'threat to security'?

How a problem or threat is viewed and discussed depends on the prevailing cultural and social attitudes. According to one account, HIV/AIDS is a 'military and security issue' since it inhibits some governments from sending peacekeeping troops 'for fear that soldiers deployed abroad may further spread the virus or bring it back to their local communities' (22). This argument is echoed by Peter Piot, director of the United Nation programme UNAIDS, who compares AIDS to terrorism on the basis that the disease can cause poverty and unrest which can in turn lead to cross-border conflict (23). However, why this disease should be conceptualised as a security issue, as opposed to a health problem, is far from clear.

Similarly, infectious diseases such as avian flu have the potential to kill large numbers of people, but why describe them as national security issues rather than as public health problems? Environmental degradation and climate change may well represent a major challenge to human ingenuity – but they are not problems that require a military or security solution. They demand technical and political responses.

Of course, in one sense everything – from unemployment to a computer virus – has some bearing on the state of security. But such problems are very different to the threat of intentionally promoted organised violence. Protection against such violence by the state is a key aspect of security policy. The attempt to expand the meaning of security either confuses the issue and disorientates the response to the threat of terrorist violence, or it extends security policies into areas for which it is not suited.

Proponents of the new security agenda often criticise those behind the 'war on terror' for conspiring to create a climate of fear. So according to the authors of *Global Responses To Global Threats; Sustainable Security For The Twenty-First Century*:

'The "war on terror" is creating a climate of fear that can be politically advantageous for those in power; a climate in which, for example, a sizeable percentage of Americans consistently, and unrealistically, report they are worried that they or someone in their family will become a victim of terrorism.' (24)

The authors of the report are critical of the tendency to promote and manipulate fear of terrorism. Yet they have few inhibitions when it comes to raising public anxiety about their own fear agenda. So the report goes on to argue that if its agenda of dealing with climate change, global poverty, arms proliferation and competition for scarce resources is ignored, then that will make 'future terrorist attacks more likely' (25).

The new Malthusian security advocates use fearmongering tactics every bit as shamelessly as those overseeing the 'war on terror'. Indeed, in the very process of depicting environmental and health issues as a major threat to human survival, they actually take the politics of fear far beyond the alarmist scenarios dreamt up by the architects of the 'war on terror'. The Malthusian security agenda accepts the ideology of anti-terrorism in order to draw attention to its claim that there are even graver problems threatening the future and security of humanity.

In one very important sense, however, the Malthusian security agenda is even more retrograde than the traditionalist security agenda. The traditional variety was usually focused on a specific enemy; in many instances the enemy was clearly identified – the Russians, the Cubans, or some specific group of subversives. Today's security agenda, by contrast, is uncertain about how to distinguish friend from foe and what the problem really is. According to this view, there are no friends or foes. The new security agenda adopts a fiercely misanthropic outlook and blames human behaviour in general for threatening security. They believe that our behaviour – leading to population growth, consumption of oil, environmental degradation – is the real threat. For them, threats are transnational, global, interconnected; in other words, everything is a potential threat. Infectious diseases, environmental problems, economic discontent and terrorist violence are seen as being parts of a broader, generic security problem.

In years to come, this approach, which is now institutionalised through the US Department of Homeland Security, is likely to expand into more and more spheres of human experience. It is surely only a matter of time before the assumption implicit in the Malthusian security agenda – that we do not simply need a 'war on terror' but a 'war on everything' – will be made more explicit.

Frank Furedi is author of *Politics of Fear: Beyond Left and Right* (buy this book from Amazon (UK) or Amazon (USA)).

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- (25) Abbott et al, p.26