

Invited Talk: *Governing the Safety State*

**Charles D. Raab
University of Edinburgh**

*Presented at the International Conference of the
PRESCIENT Project
27-28 November 2012, Berlin*

Contents

- Introduction: Dichotomies
- The 'Safety State' Concept: Overview
- 'Safety' Discourse: Risk, and Domains
- Information and Communication Processes in the Safety State
- The 'Garrison State'
- Governing the Safety State
- The Place of Privacy: A Paradox

Introduction: Dichotomies

- ‘They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety’. (Benjamin Franklin, 1775)
- ‘security drives democracy, while democracy does not beget security’ (p. ix); ‘democratization cannot lead: it must follow the establishment of basic security’ (p. xi); ‘the provision of basic security is the paramount human good, upon which all other political goods depend’ (p. xviii). (Amitai Etzioni, *Security First*, 2007)

3

The ‘Safety State’ Concept: Overview (1)

- ‘Under such circumstances, an alternative legitimation of state authority...need[s] urgently to be found; unsurprisingly, it is currently being sought in protection against dangers to *personal safety*. In the political formula of the personal safety state, the spectre of an uncertain future and social degradation against which the then *social* state swore to insure its citizens not so long ago is being gradually yet consistently replaced by the threat of a paedophile let loose, a serial killer, an obtrusive beggar, mugger, stalker, prowler, poisoner of water and food, terrorist: or better yet by all such threats rolled into one in the virtually interchangeable figures of the native ‘underclass’ or the illegal immigrant, a foreign body from birth to death and forever a potential ‘enemy within’, against whom the security state promises to defend its subjects tooth and nail.’ (Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear*, 2006, p. 148; emphasis in original)

4

The 'Safety State' Concept: Overview (2)

- '[c]lass societies remain related to the ideal of *equality* in their developmental dynamics...[n]ot so the risk society. Its normative counter-project, which is its basis and motive force, is *safety*. The place of the value system of the 'unequal' society is taken by the value system of the 'unsafe' society.... Basically, one is no longer concerned with attaining something 'good', but rather with *preventing* the worst.... The dream of class society is that everyone wants and ought to have a *share* of the pie. The utopia of the risk society is that everyone should be *spared* from poisoning.'
- (Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society*, 1986, p. 49; emphasis in original)

5

'Safety' Discourse: Risk, and Domains (1)

- Discourse about safety is a rich mixture of themes about the avoidance of danger, and about concealment, disorder, impurity, fear, disharmony, conflict, violence, surprise and distrust. It is about the achievement or preservation of order and decorum, the familiar and the comfortable, the pure and the clean, at different levels of scale.
- The understanding of risk and how different people in different domains of life handle it is central to the analytical construct of the safety state.
- 'Resilience' and 'anticipation' are two strategies used by those who are in search of safety. (Aaron Wildavsky, *Searching for Safety*, 1988, pp. 77-103)
- *Resilience* is not a risk-averse strategy: it has to do with responses to situations, trial and error, learning from mistakes, applying remedies, and incremental adaptation in the light of experience; it copes with the *results* of successful threats.
- *Anticipation*, on the other hand, shies away from risk-taking: it has to do with foreknowledge, timidity, precaution, avoidance of error, and the prevention of bad experiences; it ensures safety *before* threats materialise.
- We may say that, in the safety state, which is the risk-averse state, anticipation trumps resilience, bearing in mind that these are not necessarily separate strategies because one can prepare to be resilient rather than letting trouble happen. The safety state relies heavily on the precautionary principle: things, or people, are considered risky until proved safe, and we err on the side of caution.
- We can assess the extent to which this is so by noting shifts in the pattern of expenditure and resources, and in the formation of different skills and skill groups to put precaution first. These are only crude indicators, but they tell us something about cultural or national predispositions either to leave things to chance and mop up afterward, or to prevent bad things happening. This in turn tells us something about risk-acceptance and risk-aversion.

6

'Safety' Discourse: Risk, and Domains (2)

- The global and local arenas form a continuum on the dimension of political geography. Safety discourse and the provision of safety takes place along it, with regard to some of the most headline-producing events of our time: terrorism, crime, immigration, environmental hazards, nuclear accidents, earthquakes epidemics, *tsunamis*, and defence of sovereign territory.
- This could be called 'grand safety': the security of the larger public world.
- 'Petty safety' is about the security of much smaller, more mundane public worlds, of the private world, and of interpersonal relations.
- Petty safety is the theme of anxieties around neighbourly relations, personal health risks, the safety of consumer products, the household and the street environment and the workplace, hygiene, credit-card theft, and the like. It is about seat belts, school canoeing trips, and living close to electric power lines. It is about the gated communities of the rich and the defensible spaces on the housing estates of the poor. It is about anti-social behaviour, shopping malls and 'hoodies'.
- The global/local continuum and the 'serious'/'less weighty' continuum cut across each other. They do not sufficiently distinguish between the dimensions of space, severity, and source of remedy.
- There is also a time dimension: petty-safety issues can escalate into grand-safety disasters, with public policy implications. Epidemics may be an example. Grand-safety solutions may bring petty-safety problems, and petty-safety solutions may displace problems onto the grand-safety level. Nuclear power stations and wrapping most foods in plastic for hygienic reasons provide examples of these and other permutations.
- How, when and why the grand and the petty interact needs to be theorised and researched.

7

'Safety' Discourse: Risk, and Domains (3)

- The safety state has structural and power implications. There would be a change in the relative influence of skill groups, bureaucracies and elites that grew up around issues defined in terms of welfare, health, etc., and those that deal with the means and ends of safety and security. There would be a change in the arguments about resources, and a change in the allocation of governing responsibilities for promoting the various values.
- The US Department of Homeland Security is functionally focused on safety and security and, psychologically, on reassuring the public that government is responding to their fears.
- The ramifications are extensive, embracing public health and biodefence vaccination, emergency response systems, the protection of food supplies, and much else. It is a dedicated, sprawling central government department commanding vast resources.
- This evidences policy elites' view through the lenses of safety. Because some, if not all, of these dangers are not imaginary, the plausibility of the safety rationale fuels the political and moral engine for these changes.
- Whether the interests of safety are actually served, in terms of outputs and outcome would require close scrutiny, no matter how the inputs are measured.

8

Information and Communication Processes in the Safety State (1)

- Understanding information and communication phenomena is central for understanding the strategies that may be used in the safety state, partly in pursuit of safety, and partly in pursuit of resistance to the pursuit of safety.
- The collection and use of information systematically as a resource for safety is an increasingly important component, whether it is a database about the structural composition of houses, the mapping of likely crime areas, the analysis of meteorological patterns, the plotting of general population trends, or the habits of some or all knowable individuals.
- Surveillance studies scholars talk about techniques of data-mining and profiling in implementing discriminatory practices for many reasons, whether for profit or for safety. 'Proof' that some persons pose no danger requires information and intelligence about them: the equivalent of scientific reports on GM crops. But categorisation and stereotyping pose dangers to persons.
- The safety state is strengthened by the revolution in information and communication technologies as its handmaiden. In many functional domains of governance, safety solutions depend heavily upon new ways of gathering, analysing and communicating information as part of strategies that seek to anticipate and to control whatever may be perceived to threaten safety.
- We may measure the rise of the safety state by noting the heavy investment in classifications, analytical capacity, and infrastructures for amassing safety-related information about the individuals who are categorised.
- In the safety state, we may say that the *means of prediction* overtake the *means of production* as the prized resource. Information is capital.

9

Information and Communication Processes in the Safety State (2)

- Some devices permit more accurate readings of safety in various situations, including boundaries and borders that range in global/ local scale from international borders to rooms within buildings.
- Investment is now devoted to engineering solutions – sensors of all sorts – and biometric devices such as iris scans, DNA tests, facial recognition systems, blood-vessel pattern recognition, and the like. There are also safety technologies that relate to processing information about people and objects in motion, such as Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) devices, hi-tech passports, and vehicle-tracking technologies using transponders or satellites.
- The safety state relies on knowledge of who and what is moving where, when and why. Geographic information systems (GIS), technologies, and geo-coded data proliferate in schemes for the intensified surveillance of the location and physical movements of people.
- Spatially coded information tailors social policies to certain groups, but also to target suspicion upon others. It assists in the rearrangement of distributional patterns of safety and risk across society. As a dual-use technology embracing both social services and social regulation, GIS can help to keep us healthy, wealthy, safe, and in order.
- The safety state emphasises high-tech solutions, and denies their use to potential opponents, just as some countries restrict their populations' access to the Internet.
- The safety state presses for personal identification in the search for 'real identity'. Complexity gives way to a 'no-nonsense' positivism that supports administrative simplicity and the imputation of identity through classification systems. To the extent that such institutionalised knowledge itself affects what people do, identification itself may become a major factor in controlling behaviour.

10

The 'Garrison State'

- In the hypothetical 'garrison state', security would be the paramount value. Society would become militarised under the dominance of an elite in command of the means of violence, and sustained in part by a supportive ideology and symbols. (Harold Lasswell, 'The Garrison State', *American Journal of Sociology*, 46, 4, 1941, pp. 455-68.)
- The elite are unlikely to be specialists in violence in the traditional military mould. Rather, they would be widely recruited and possess many of the skills, talents, personalities and outlooks of civilian business managers, scientists, engineers, lawyers, and others, as well as the military.
- The distinction between what is 'military' and what is 'civilian' becomes very unclear. This blurring is the more likely in a war on terrorism, in which 'military intervention occurs in the homeland, and the homeland is also the front line for the terrorist's war' (Matthew Morgan, 'The Garrison State Revisited: Civil-Military Implications of Terrorism and Security', *Contemporary Politics*, 10, 1, 2004, p. 7). It is said that terrorists are not 'overseas', but within our midst, and who knows who or where they are, or when or where they might strike, and how? That is why it is called 'terror'; it induces fear.
- The distinction is also blurred in the European Security Research Programme, and in the inclusion of high-tech security research as a main element in the EU's 7th Framework Research Programme. Substantial research-and-development resources are being deployed for the safety state, and information technologies of military provenance are finding a role in law enforcement and civilian applications. This is why it is crucial to have something like a critical, safety-state perspective and presence to bring to bear on this research.

11

Governing the Safety State

- The safety-state construct reflects many of the characteristics of the garrison state but has a wider scope in terms of societal, or petty-safety, manifestations.
- How might the safety state be governed? How – and by whom – can it be kept within limits and made proportional so that the claims of safety and risk-aversion do not win hands-down over other values.
- Safety-state governance needs to become more transparent about the motives and mechanisms of the safety state itself. Its governance ought to be concerned with the way in which risk assessments of all kinds of threats to safety are carried out, by whom, how transparent they are, and what the general public's input could be. Systems of political accountability need to work better at various levels.
- Government is likely to conclude, blandly, that we need to find a trade-off or 'balance' between safety and other values, even though safety tends to win because government says its provision is the top priority. But it is not obvious how safety is to be 'balanced' against other considerations that may appear, from the perspective of a fearful public and of fearful governments, to promote risk. Thus safeguards against the misuse of power and its information systems may be ineffective.
- Governments might reason that the implementation of a safety agenda is not so much an end, but a means for promoting the good of the clients it serves, and for the public interest.
- Governments propagate a redesigned public philosophy built around safety and security as the principal values of 'the public interest'. Whether the public can think alternative thoughts and bring evidence to bear, particularly about petty safety but also about its own enrolment in grand-safety projects, is less certain. The value placed on safety, and its political and social popularity, necessitate an evidence-based, continuing public debate about these matters, which politicians and governments themselves are reluctant to sponsor.

12

The Place of Privacy: A Paradox

- It is misleading to place safety and privacy on different balancing pans, construing the trade-off in social *versus* anti-social terms.
- This is because the public interest is *also* served by the preservation of individual rights, and in particular, because the public sphere of a democratic society and polity cannot itself function without the protection of the privacy of the individuals whose participation in its affairs is central. Therefore, the main antagonism may be between *competing conceptions of the public interest*, and that is a more complex dilemma.
- *Paradox*: it can be argued that privacy *itself* is a *safety* value and is often promoted as such. It can be a protective, defensive and risk-averse value, guarding against spatial or informational encroachments on the individual. Privacy advocates themselves invoke the precautionary principle in criticising state security policies and surveillance technologies.
- Both privacy, as conventionally understood, and the security of society or the state can therefore be seen as *two 'takes' on safety*, and that changes the nature of the argument.
- It is not easy to assert privacy claims or to underpin them with new theoretical formulations that go against the grain of contemporary policy agendas and public attitudes. Privacy may not be the value that should trump all others. However, an interpretation of the importance of privacy as a *social value* gives us *two 'takes' on 'public interest'*.
- Linking this to the question of safety may be an essential underpinning of attempts to shape the governance of the safety state and to keep it within the bounds of a society that values equality and freedom.

13

c.d.raab@ed.ac.uk

14