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**The Political Construction of Collective Insecurity:
From Moral Panic to Blame Avoidance
and Organized Irresponsibility**

by

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Abstract

This theoretical contribution explores the role of political actors in the social construction of collective insecurity. Two parts comprise the article. The first one briefly defines the concept of collective insecurity and the second one bridges existing sociological and political science literatures relevant for the analysis of the politics of insecurity. This theoretical framework articulates five main claims. First, although interesting, the concept of moral panic applies only to a limited range of insecurity episodes. Second, citizens of contemporary societies exhibit acute risk awareness and, when new collective threats emerge, the logic of “organized irresponsibility” often leads citizens and interest groups alike to blame elected officials. Third, political actors mobilize credit claiming and blame avoidance strategies to respond to these 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. Finally, their behavior is proactive or reactive, as political actors can either help push a threat onto the agenda early, or, at a later stage, simply attempt to shape the perception of this threat after other forces have transformed it into a major political issue.

During the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign, the Republican Party ran a television ad featuring menacing wolves roaming a dark forest. Simultaneously, a female announcer warned voters that “weakness attracts those who are waiting to do America harm” (Associated Press, 2004). In the context of a campaign centered on terrorism and national security, no one could miss the Republican message: only George W. Bush and the Republican Party would adequately protect the United States against the terrorizing army of terrorist wolves. Only a few weeks before the ad appeared on television, sociologist Robb Willer published an article demonstrating that insecurity related to terrorism had boosted the popularity of the Republican President. Using time-series analyses, Willer showed that the Post-September 11 terror warnings consistently increased popular support for the Republican President (Willer, 2004).

This example raises a crucial question that is seldom addressed in the existing social science literature about fear and insecurity: what is the concrete role of political actors and strategies in the social construction of collective insecurity? Few social scientists have dealt extensively with this question in part because the available scholarship on collective insecurity focuses mainly on the role of culture and the mass media. A major aspect of this literature is to argue that citizens are “afraid of the wrong things.” For example, this is the case of Barry Glassner’s *The Culture of Fear* (1999) and Frank Furedi’s *Culture of Fear* (2002).¹ Although it is grounded in the same assumption, Corey Robin’s book about the history of political fear is more relevant for the present contribution than those of Glassner and Furedi. In *Fear*, Robin (2004) explores the history of the idea of fear in modern political theory. Through an analysis of McCarthyism and contemporary labor relations, his book also argues that “repressive fear” is an enduring tool of economic and political domination in the United States. For Robin, U.S. 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 collective insecurity is a necessary repressive tool in the hands of poli-

¹ On the construction of fear see also, Altheide, 2002.

ticians is problematic at best. For example, during the early days of the British debate over BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy), conservative officials attempted to reduce the level of environmental fear and collective 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 repressive historical 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 crucial questions by formulating a theoretical framework for the analysis of the politics of insecurity. Exploratory 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 section has the objective of defining the concept of collective insecurity. The second part is far lengthier, and it bridges existing sociological and political science literatures relevant for the analysis of the political construction of collective insecurity. This theoretical discussion articulates five main claims. First, although interesting, the concept of moral panic applies only to a limited range of insecurity episodes. The "threat infrastructure" of a particular policy area largely determines 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" leads citizens and interest groups to blame elected officials for "bad news." Third, political actors mobilize credit claiming and blame avoidance strategies to respond to 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. Finally, their behavior is proactive or reactive, as political actors can either help push a threat onto the agenda early or, at a later stage, simply attempt to shape the perception of this threat after other forces have transformed it into a major social and political issue. All in all, the article argues that political actors, not only the mass media, are instrumental in shaping the perception of collective threats.

Defining Insecurity

Before sketching a theoretical framework about the construction of collective insecurity, one must clarify the meaning of this very concept. Insecurity refers both to the subjective feeling

of anxiety and to the concrete lack of protection. A 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.”² This definition used through the book articulates these two aspects of insecurity: “the state of fear or anxiety stemming from a concrete or alleged lack of protection.” This article focuses on *collective* insecurity, which affects particular segments of the population or even society as a whole.

The starting point of this article 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.³ Although individuals experience fear and anxiety in everyday life, collective insecurity first emerges through the transformation of personal or environmental matters into social and political issues.⁴ 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 of how to select, order, and explain signals emanating from [the environment]” (Kasperson, Kasperson, Pidgeon, and Slovic, 2003: 15). After perceived sources of insecurity are defined as collective problems affecting a significant segment of the population, they can enter the policy agenda. The analytical framework sketched below focuses on agenda setting and the way political actors both construct and respond to the forms of collective insecurity that move in and out of the policy agenda. Only forms of insecurity defined as collective issues of concern can legitimize the development of state protection.

Yet, as opposed to what a purely constructivist approach would suggest, the sociological and political analysis of collective insecurity must pay serious attention to the concrete nature of the threats at stake. This means that there is a “threat infrastructure” to the politics of insecurity because the nature of perceived threats creates constraints and opportunities for political actors dealing with them. For example, highly episodic threats such as terrorism are more likely to generate panic waves than more structural – and less spectacular – sources of insecurity like unemployment or, in a country like the United States, the lack of health care coverage. As argued

² For a discussion about the meaning of insecurity, see Orsberg, 1998.

³ On the idea that the world is socially constructed, see Berger and Luckmann, 1967. The work of Mary Douglas about risk perception is a good starting point to the acknowledgement that insecurity is a social construction, not a purely objective reality (Douglas, 1992).

⁴ To a certain extent, this is what Wright Mills labeled “sociological imagination” (Mills, 1959).

here, the analysis of collective insecurity must include a discussion of the “threat infrastructure” specific to the policy area under consideration.

These remarks about the “threat infrastructure” point to the high level of institutional fragmentation that characterizes state protection. But what is state protection, exactly? Analytically distinct from other state missions like legal regulation and fiscal extraction, state protection refers to policy interventions that aim at fighting collective insecurity through the reduction of economic, environmental, and security threats. Major areas of state protection include policing, social security, and environmental protection (Béland, 2005). The present article is grounded in the assumption that the politics of insecurity shares major characteristics across these different policy areas. Yet, the article also recognizes that the nature of the “threat infrastructure” varies from one policy area to another. Taking these variations into account is necessary to move the political and sociological analysis of collective insecurity beyond general remarks about political behavior and the social construction of reality.

The Politics of Insecurity

Understanding how political actors participate in the construction of collective insecurity is a difficult task. The following discussion articulates distinct streams of sociological and political science literature sketching a framework for the study of the politics of insecurity. Dealing with the scholarship on moral panic, the first section suggests that, although useful, this concept applies to a limited range of episodes, as 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. The second section discusses Beck’s theory of risk society. This theory underlines two crucial issues that contribute to our understanding of the politics of insecurity in contemporary societies. First, this theory stresses the acute risk awareness that characterizes our historical era. Second, the concept of “organized irresponsibility” points to the important fact that, nowadays, elected officials are frequently blamed for accidents and other “bad news” that are not always under their direct control. When a problem occurs, citizens turn to the state and its agents. The third section builds on these arguments to explore the two types of strategies political actors mobilize in the context of the politics of insecurity: credit claiming and blame avoidance. Section four shows how formal political institutions and feedback effects from existing policies impact these strategies. The final section formulates remarks about the role of agenda setting and framing in the political construction of insecurity. This discussion

leads to the analysis of the distinction between proactive and reactive behavior, which helps classify political strategies surrounding the construction of collective insecurity.

Moral Panic

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

The concept of moral panic emerged during the first half of the 1970s. 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).⁵ Yet, Stanley Cohen was the first author to use this concept in a systematic way. In his book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen 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 (Cohen, 1972: 28).

Frequently cited, this paragraph constitutes 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. Highly publicized criminal episodes involving juvenile delinquents prompted this disproportionate political reaction. A consensus among the political class emerged to condemn the teenaged “folk devils” and reinforce social order through enacting a merely symbolic legislation against delinquency. “To

⁵ On the history of the concept of moral panic, see Thompson, 1998: 7 and Critcher, 2003: 9-30.

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" (*ibid.*, 138). According to the moral panic literature, the mass media can play a central role in the construction of the threats against which political actors claim to protect the population. Consequently, Stanley Cohen and his followers made a significant contribution to scholarly literature by stressing the role of the mass media in the construction of collective insecurity. 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 underlines the social and political construction of insecurity in contemporary societies.⁶

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 behavior of a certain group or category and the consequences that that behavior 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 behavior 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 behavior. (...) 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 behavior in question than actually are, and the threat, damage and danger, or damage said to be caused by the behavior 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 moral panic literature for the general analysis of the politics of insecurity. Taking into account potential variations in the "threat infrastructure" help reveal the limitations of this literature for the comparative analysis of the politics of insecurity. First, some forms of collective insecurity cannot always 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

⁶ For other, more recent examples of moral panic studies see Jenkins, 1992; Welch, 2000.

global warming to a single group or individual. As will be shown below, politicians themselves are frequently blamed for events and processes for which they are not directly responsible. Second, although threats can be amplified or fabricated, few students of insecurity would argue that this is always the case. In fact, many significant threats can go undetected. Furthermore, attempts are regularly made to downplay or even to hide some potential threats from the public. And if politicians sometimes inflate threats and exploit collective insecurity, at other times they can make possible threats look inconsequential, especially when the threat at stake remains away from the public's eye. The example of the pre-1996 British debate over BSE mentioned above provides ground to this claim. Third, some forms of collective insecurity that citizens experience in their everyday lives have no explicit moral meaning. These forms of insecurity represent mere technological and scientific risks that may exist beyond "right" and "wrong." Fourth, as opposed to what the idea of moral panic may suggest, socially constructed forms of insecurity are not always episodic in nature. Some of them—for example those related to massive unemployment or epidemic diseases like AIDS—can last for years or even decades. In the field of social policy, for example, the debate over health care coverage in the United States that took place during the 1992 presidential campaign and the beginning of the Clinton presidency was not a panic episode in the strong sense of the term (e.g. Hacker, 1997). Once again, this is related to the "threat infrastructure" of this policy area, which is more structural and slow moving than episodic in nature (i.e. decline in health insurance coverage is gradual and seldom related to spectacular media images). Such "threat infrastructure" is less conducive to panic reactions than those of terrorism or sudden environmental catastrophes, for example.

Risk Society and "Organized Irresponsibility"

Considering the limitations of the concept of moral panic, one can turn to Ulrich Beck's theory of risk society in order to improve our understanding of the politics of insecurity in contemporary societies. Bringing this theory in at this point of the discussion is relevant because it offers crucial insight into the nature of collective insecurity in contemporary societies, and about the relationship between politics and insecurity.

German social theorist Ulrich Beck 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" (Beck, 1998: 10). For Beck, the notion of risk

emerges in a world “characterized by the loss of a clear distinction between nature and culture” (*ibid.*). According to this author, anxiety about environmental risks has become a central issue and a major source of solidarity in contemporary societies. From this perspective, such anxiety is 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 the 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 (Mehta, 1997). A symptom of what Beck calls “reflexive modernity,” acute risk awareness has serious political consequences because it can further increase the reliance on state experts and decision makers to evaluate and fight older and newer threats. Furthermore, as Giddens points out, risk awareness is closely related to trust, as citizens have to place their confidence in experts and civil servants they rarely know personally in order 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, so-called “organized irresponsibility” impacts politics in a direct manner. The concept of “organized irresponsibility” refers to the fact that it is hard to find out who is responsible 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. And because these disasters can affect everyone, collective insecurity related to perceived environmental risks is widespread. Yet, as it is sometimes difficult to identify who is at the origin of such disasters, politicians themselves are “made responsible for decisions they didn’t take and for consequences and threats they know nothing about” (*ibid.*). When things turn bad, 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 labor unions may call the state for help and, in case 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 (*ibid.*: 21).

Considering the expansion of state protection over the last two centuries, 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.⁷

Although the risk society literature is most insightful, a systematic analysis of the politics of insecurity requires a more detailed understanding of the strategies impacting the construction of collective insecurity across policy areas. The next section puts forward a broad institutionalist framework for such an 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).⁸ First, they seek election and reelection. 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 the attainment of the three other goals mentioned above. In order to reach such goals, political actors pursue credit claiming and blame avoidance strategies.

Credit claiming refers to the way politicians claim responsibility for “good news” like full employment, reduction in crime rates, or the enactment of a popular environmental legisla-

⁷ 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. The debate over the regulation of Ecstasy provides ground to this claim.

⁸ On the concept of political field, see Bourdieu, 1991.

tion.⁹ 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, in the same token, reduce poverty and economic insecurity. Yet, in other cases, the link between political decisions and economic, social, and environmental outcomes is problematic at best. For instance, elected officials can claim credit for economic 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 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? Furthermore, 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 the 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 present across time and policy areas, credit claiming is probably less central to the politics of insecurity than blame avoidance. This is true because, as opposed to credit claiming, blame avoidance is usually related to “bad news” that may exacerbate economic, social, and environmental insecurity. “Bad news” can take the form of higher crime rates, terrorist attacks, higher unemployment rates, or environmental disasters. “Bad news” can generate *political* risks because, as Beck suggests, elected officials are regularly blamed for “bad news” even when it is not directly related 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 incapacity—or unwillingness—to prevent this situation from occurring 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 taking

⁹ David Mayhew (1974) is the first author who theorized credit claiming through an analysis of U.S. congressional politics.

place in the private sector. Furthermore, unpopular fiscal measures that seek to balance the budget and restructure state protection also constitute “bad news” that can generate blame against 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 domination of neo-liberalism and new fiscal imperatives have increased the political risks elected officials 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 imagined a complex array of strategies that can help them prevent, deflect, and/or delay blame generated by “bad news.” In a widely cited article, R. Kent Weaver distinguishes among eight major blame-avoidance strategies. Although these strategies are discussed exclusively in the context of U.S. policymaking, they illustrate the diversity of the tactics put forward by various political actors 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 actors to take the potentially harmful decisions); 5) finding a scapegoat (blaming others for unpopular measures and outcomes); 6) jumping on the bandwagon (supporting politically popular options); 7) circling the wagons (diffusing blame among many different actors); and, 8) the “stop me before I kill again” (political actors working against their own policy preferences in order to prevent blame generation situations) (Weaver, 1986: 385). 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. For instance, these officials may blame economic cycles for an increase in unemployment in order to convince the public that their decisions are not at the origin of the negative situation. And when a terrorist attack occurs, those in power may blame their predecessors for the gaps in the security apparatus that could

have facilitated terrorist actions. This is what members of the Bush administration did in the aftermath of September 11.¹⁰

In the context of the politics of insecurity, however, elected officials may pursue blame avoidance strategies that are not mentioned in Weaver's article. On the one hand, downplaying the scope of the threats citizens face can become a politically appropriate blame avoidance strategy. This is especially true when these threats are hardly on the public's radar screen. Arguing that debated threats have been exaggerated could legitimize past and present inaction, which could in turn shield elected officials from blame, at least in the short run. On the other hand, inflating perceived threats could also deflect blame away from politicians when their opponents depict their policy proposals as too radical. For example, President George W. Bush dramatized the threat that the Hussein regime posed to U.S. 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.

Political Institutions and Policy Legacies

In order to understand their meaning, it is necessary to place political strategies in their particular institutional context. As evidenced by the historical institutionalist literature, formal political institutions, such as electoral rules, largely impact the behavior of elected officials and interest groups (e.g. Immergut, 1998; Skocpol, 1992). For example, the U.S. Congressional system is more permeable to the direct influence of interest groups than the British parliamentary system. This reality affects the way interests impact policy outcomes. Additionally, electoral schedules set the time frame according to 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 actors. The constitutional and institutional rules of the game impact the manner in which these actors put forward their credit claiming and blame avoidance strategies. In the U.S. 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). Further-

¹⁰ For example, this is what attorney general John Ashcroft did in his testimony to the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (Nagourney and Lichtblau, 2004).

more, power fragmentation in the United States discourages the enacting of bold legislative proposals in the absence of short-term economic or political crises. For that reason, political actors and interest groups have a strong tendency to create a sense of crisis in order 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.¹¹ This remark is relevant for the analysis of the politics of insecurity as it underlines the possible relationship between the construction of insecurity (i.e. the sense of crisis) and elaboration of electoral strategies (i.e. coalition building). Although less prominent, this relationship also exists in other countries.

In addition to formal rules and institutions, political actors must take into account policy legacies and vested interests in order to elaborate winning electoral and political strategies. From an institutionalist viewpoint, the concept of policy feedback is important to the understanding of the politics of insecurity. This concept refers to the political constraints and opportunities generated by well-established public policies. In his work on the “new politics of the welfare state” cited above, for example, Paul Pierson argues that large social programs like public pensions and national health insurance enacted in the postwar 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 neo-liberal 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).¹²

These remarks about 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. This is true in part because public policies produce different vested interests between different policy areas—or even within the same policy area. If social policies that cover most or all citizens create powerful “armies of beneficiaries” that favor the preservation of these policies, environmental regulations generate weaker and less defined constituencies while facing the incessant lobbying of business interests opposing such regulations. Institutional legacies and vested interests can strongly impact the politics of insecurity and the development of state protection. Simultaneously, the nature of the threats that these

¹¹ The author would like to thank John Myles for his insight about this issue.

¹² Furthermore, national crises like the events of September 11 can empower security lobbies that seek to build up policing and surveillance apparatuses (Haggerty and Gazso, 2005).

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 quicker to stimulate sweeping legislative actions than low profile environmental hazards that have not been publicly defined as a major danger for human life. All in all, threats that attract much 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.¹³ This statement also points to the time frame to which experts and political actors refer in order 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 actors than major, long-term issues like global warming. Finally, the social and political status of those affected by these threats can impact 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” impact the way political actors build their strategies and respond to particular threats.

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 actors construct threats and policy responses to them. Such analysis of 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” (*ibid.*). Because political actors can only focus on a few core issues simultaneously, the construction and selection of the problems on the agenda constitute a key phase of the policymaking process.¹⁴ As a result, beliefs about what the most pressing problems of the day are must be taken into account. By framing the *perception* of threats, political actors attempt to depict themselves as the best providers of collective protection in order to increase their popular support and shape a positive and lasting

¹³ 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 plane crashes (Kasperson, Kasperson, Pidgeon, and Slovic, 2003: 13-14). On risk perception and communication see also Slovic, 2000.

¹⁴ On the social and political construction of policy problems, see Rochefort and Cobb, 1994.

legacy. For example, after the events of September 11, President Bush depicted the world as a dangerous place, and military might 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.

When involved in the construction of collective threats, political actors can adopt either a proactive or a reactive behavior regarding these threats. On the one hand, proactive behavior characterizes political actors who seek to increase the attention towards a specific source of insecurity. This attempt to exacerbate insecurity related to a particular policy area means that political actors can help initiate an episode of acute collective insecurity. For example, the debate over crime and delinquency at the center of the 2002 French presidential campaign is a typical example of proactive behavior on the part of politicians interested in shifting the attention towards a threat to which they claim to respond. In that case, like right wing candidates, like Jacques Chirac and Jean-Marie Le Pen, had a strong incentive to push crime and delinquency to the center 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). On the other hand, a major episode of collective insecurity may emerge independently from the actions of major political actors who attempt to reframe this episode to their advantage after it has emerged. For example, this reactive behavior is clearly present in the case of the 1996 British panic episode over BSE. After downplaying the potential public health threat for almost a decade, Conservatives were forced to acknowledge it and shift the blame away from them by accruing foreign countries to impose an unfair ban on British beef (Brookes, 1999). Yet, as this example suggests, reactive behavior does not mean that political actors are not involved in the shaping of threat perception once they begin addressing issues they have not pushed on the agenda in the first place. The recognition that the politics of insecurity involves both proactive and reactive strategies is crucial to understanding the complexities of such politics.

Discussion

The above section bridged several streams of scholarship in order to pave the road to the systematic analysis of the politics of insecurity in contemporary societies. From this discussion, it is possible to isolate five major claims that could guide future empirical analysis about the

politics of insecurity. First, this discussion underlines the limitations of the concept of moral panic, which applies 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. Second, following Beck, one can argue that 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 actors attempt to deflect blame when things turn bad while claiming credits for “good news” and, in some cases, the effective reduction in collective insecurity. Fourth, in framing these strategies, political actors face powerful interests and institutional forces that create major constraints and opportunities for these strategic actors. If we add the weight of the “threat infrastructure” discussed above, it means that the capacity of political actors to shape the perception of collective insecurity and benefit from it is facing major structural constraints. Finally, the strategies of these actors can take the form of proactive or reactive behavior. This means that political actors can either become instrumental in pushing a threat onto the policy agenda (proactive behavior) or simply attempt to impact the perception of this threat after other actors have transformed it into a major political and social issue (reactive behavior).

All in all, these five claims give a more complex meaning to the general argument that political actors actively participate in the construction of collective insecurity. Although this argument should not be understood as a claim that such actors have unlimited control over shared perceptions of insecurity, it is clear that the study of collective insecurity, instead of focusing mainly on the mass media, should recognize that political actors and strategies may carry much weight in the social construction of collective insecurity. But, as opposed to what Robin suggested in *Fear* (2004), recognizing the central role of political actors 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, 2005).

In order to stimulate future research about the politics of insecurity, it is relevant to stress the two main limitations of this theoretical contribution. First, this exploratory article does not offer definite answers about the social and political construction of insecurity. 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. Second, the message

of this article is not that collective insecurity is more present in contemporary societies than it was in the past.¹⁵ 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, as the expansion of state protection may offset the increase in risk awareness. Yet, it is true that, in spite of 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. And, despite its enduring oppressive side, the national state still does much to protect civil society against major economic, environmental, and security threats. In the future, scholars could compare the transformation of the politics of insecurity at different historical stages in order to assess if the sense of collective insecurity is stronger today than in societies of the past. What is certain at this stage of the scholarly debate about collective insecurity is that the analysis of the political strategies surrounding the construction of insecurity is necessary to understanding some of the most influential social and political processes of our time. This is why more research on the politics of insecurity is needed.

¹⁵ Among the authors arguing that our society is exceptionally prompt to react to fear and insecurity see Furedi, 2003; Tudor, 2003.

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