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# THE CHANGE IN PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO DANGER

and its implications  
for major projects

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## KEYWORDS

- PUBLIC OPINION
- PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE
- RISK
- THREAT

Nanotechnologies, GMOs, fracking, radioactivity... Modern societies are characterized by both the proliferation of risks and an increasing difficulty in assuaging public opinion. This article analyzes how perceptions of danger have evolved and identifies key questions when it comes to social acceptability of projects.

## INTRODUCTION

*Public actors (policy-makers or elected representatives), scientists and manufacturers are frequently confronted with resistance from public opinion, in the course of their activities or their attempts to innovate. Examples abound — from nanotechnology to GMOs to fracking, not to mention almost any kind of “reform” — of the difficulty of convincing or reassuring a public that is fearful of many dangers, real or imagined.*

*In general, public opinion adheres to the precautionary principle, characterized by resistance to innovation and to economic development. Consequently, the social and environmental acceptability of projects — particularly major projects — has diminished. This has resulted in deadlock for a wide range of projects, where the gap between public opinion and that of experts or institutional actors can seemingly not be bridged.*

*This gap stems in large part from changing attitudes to danger; perceptions of danger have evolved, bringing with them new attitudes and beliefs. By taking account of these changes, we can develop a new analytical framework for understanding deadlock situations and the different perspectives at play, and — in the case of projects involving issues of social or environmental acceptability — new methodological tools for planning ahead and for designing communication strategies.*

## 1. A PROFOUND CHANGE IN ATTITUDES TO DANGER

### 1.1 DANGER, RISK, THREAT

To understand the diminishing public acceptance of risk, we made the assumption that our relationship to danger has changed, and with it the capacity to cope with or manage uncertainty.

To test this hypothesis, we developed a model that distinguishes between two different approaches to the management of danger.

The first is the historical scientific construction based on risk analysis, i.e. calculating the probabilities and comparing the costs and benefits of any given event. In this framework — which we call the “regime of risk” — risk can be calculated and quantified rationally. Given the probability of an event occurring, and the expected outcomes, one can make a fully “informed” decision. Uncertainty does not disappear, but it is to some extent circumscribed and can be managed rationally.

Our hypothesis is that this risk-based model of danger management, on which science and progress in the west depend, has been brought into question by public opinion. For multiple reasons, trust in this model has been eroded. Consequently, the scientific construction of our relationship to danger is no longer seen as offering security or reassurance, and is no longer sufficient to convince public opinion to “take the risk”. When public opinion loses faith in the fundamentals of this construction, the public is no longer able to adhere to the model, and can no longer adopt a rational position on the questions asked. As a result, the impression of danger is increased.

But danger has not gone away; we must therefore reconstruct our relationship to it. As the regime of risk is no longer operative, public opinion has, de facto, developed a new way of experiencing its relationship to danger, organized around what we have termed a “regime of threat”. Where the regime of risk deals with uncertainty by means of rational calculation, the regime of threat operates through a quite different register, in which the relationship to uncertainty can no longer be rationalized. The threat is not something that is calculated, and it is no longer possible to make an enlightened decision. As a result, risk-based danger management is destabilized by this new approach based on the notion of threat.

The difference between risk and threat is central to our core hypothesis. It is the key to understanding the divergences between institutional actors and experts on the one hand and public opinion on the other. While the risk model enables rational decisions and “risk-taking”, the regime of threat creates an inability to make rational decisions and to manage uncertainty. There is no such thing as “threat-taking”: one can only “live under threat”.

The change in our relationship to danger is summed up in the grammatical difference between risk — which we can take, as agents — and threat, which we can only endure as objects.

This change in public attitudes to danger is at the heart of the declining acceptance of industrial activity and innovation. It goes a long way toward explaining why it is impossible to understand each other: the arguments of the experts continue to be based on the risk model while public perceptions are based on the threat model. The public and the experts are not speaking the same language, and the arguments of the experts are falling on deaf ears.

### 1.2 THE REASONS FOR THE CHANGE IN ATTITUDES TO DANGER

The reasons for this change in public attitudes to danger are numerous: they are structured around an extraordinarily fierce distrust that has historical, scientific and social causes.

The crisis of trust affects many fields (political, social, economical, etc.), and one of the main ways in which it is manifested concerns the management of danger. When public opinion is marked by distrust (of politicians, experts, forecasting and calculation systems, etc.), and even by suspicion about the underlying motivations of everyone involved, it is hard for the public to buy in to the risk management model advocated by institutional actors and experts.

The depth of distrust about the relationship to danger is clearly an aspect of today's general climate of distrust, but it also has its own specific construction, with its own dynamics.

#### 1.2.1 The consequences of past crises

The first factor in the questioning of the regime of risk is that of past crises. Events such as the explosion of the reactor at Chernobyl, the contaminated blood scandals, or “mad cow” disease have left deep marks on public opinion. The fact that these crises happened showed that there were shortcomings in our ability to anticipate risks. They created serious doubts about the risk management system and its ability to calculate and prevent danger effectively.

Dramatic events (recurrent or non-recurrent) are generally reinterpreted in the light of what could, or should, have been done to prevent them, but wasn't. These crises have given root to the idea that the exposure to risk resulted from choices or decisions in which financial objectives took precedence over safety goals. For public opinion, the lasting impression is also that decisions were made without due regard for safety considerations.

These various crises of the 1990s contributed, in their way, to the broader crisis of trust in government, experts, the scientific community, and institutions in general.

**“WHERE THE REGIME OF RISK DEALS WITH UNCERTAINTY BY MEANS OF RATIONAL CALCULATION, THE REGIME OF THREAT OPERATES THROUGH A QUITE DIFFERENT REGISTER, IN WHICH THE RELATIONSHIP TO UNCERTAINTY CAN NO LONGER BE RATIONALIZED.”**

### 1.2.2 The emergence of new dangers

The second factor in the emergence of a relationship to danger governed by a logic of threat is the arrival of new dangers. The risk system works perfectly with a single, identifiable event of which the probability can be calculated and which, when it occurs, produces direct, measurable consequences. This, fundamentally, is the mode of calculation and prevention of industrial accidents.

For public opinion, the new risks do not share these attributes: their source is not clearly identified, they are invisible and impalpable; it is possible to be exposed to them passively and completely unawares; the effects they are liable to produce only emerge over the long term, and their consequences are linked to a complex chain of causes and effects which are difficult to distinguish. In the past, the asbestos crisis demonstrated that dramatic consequences can appear and be recognized very late in the day. The dioxin crisis has also created an acute sensitivity to these risks, which emerge only slowly and diffusely.

Some of these “new” dangers are seen as having properties that exclude them from the scope of conventional risk analysis: radioactivity, electromagnetic waves, GMOs, nanotechnologies. Given their characteristics, the uncertainty they arouse is matched by their invisibility, making it hard to apply the risk model, and hard for public opinion to subscribe to it. Additionally, the effects ascribed to these new risks coincide with public perceptions of cancer, in the widest sense, crystallizing the associated fears.

### 1.2.3 The inability to settle scientific controversies

The third factor in the switch from the risk model to the threat model is the new status of scientific controversy. Of course, controversies have always existed and have been instrumental, throughout history, in the forward march of progress. But the condition for a controversy to culminate in progress has always been the ability of recognized authorities to arbitrate, settle and conclude these controversies. Around this conclusion, a consensus could form, making the theory of one of the parties the new basis from which to move forward again.

But controversies can no longer be settled as they were historically. This situation is due to two phenomena. On the one hand, the crisis of trust in authority abolishes the notion of a reference authority and, with it, the ability of the authorities to settle controversies. On the other, the public is troubled by a twofold proliferation: that of scientific studies from a wide range of sources, which makes it difficult for the layman to establish a hierarchy between them, and that of the media, which facilitates access to these studies. The proliferation of traditional and online media makes it possible for anyone with the right tactical approach to reach a wide audience, independently of the institutional authority of the

author (paradoxically, even more effectively, precisely because there is no apparent authority). The Internet facilitates the endless proliferation of controversies and the traces that remain will sow further doubt for the future, regardless of any groundswell movement that eventually succeeds, succeed, de facto, in overcoming the controversy.

### 1.2.4 The functioning of the media

Independently of the media's role in propagating controversies, the way in which the media operate also contributes to the inability of public opinion to cope with uncertainty. This phenomenon stems from two characteristics of the media's handling of information, which obey the economics of broadcasting. The first is the importance of revelation, which takes precedence over the actual facts; the second is the well-known media adage that good news is no news. This mode of functioning—driven by viewer, listener or reader numbers—focuses the media spotlight on scares and on alarmist voices.

The actual form of the information produced by the media also tends to exacerbate the alarmist nature of the messages it carries, as the format makes it difficult to express nuance or complexity. Whereas most new risks are highly complex phenomena, their media treatment simplifies them, ultimately focusing only the perception of the potential threats associated with them.

## 1.3 HOW DOES PUBLIC OPINION ADAPT TO LIVING UNDER THREAT?

There are many reasons why the public has come to distrust the risk-based system on which our relationship to danger was constructed. This is not to say that it is either pleasant or comfortable to have a relationship to danger built on a “grammar of threat”. What are its main rules and characteristics?

The grammar of threat is primarily organized around the idea that it is impossible to prove an absence of danger. Such a proof is scientifically impossible, and this impossibility reinforces the idea that there is indeed a danger. Under this regime, the harder one tries to offer reassurance, the more one provokes doubt, through a paradoxical phenomenon: if it takes so much effort to prove something, then there really must be a problem! The generalization of suspicion has left its mark.

Relay antenna



The second parameter of the grammar of threat is the belief that there is no certain knowledge on which one can depend in the long term. This dynamic of questioning former certainties is nothing other than the dynamic of progress, in which the next step often contradicts or invalidates the previous state of knowledge. For public opinion, marked by the experience of crises that showed just how badly the dangers had been underestimated, this reasoning, when applied to risks, makes reassurance impossible. It echoes a more general distrust of progress, of which the benefits are no longer assessed against the risks—under the standard “regime of risk” model—but where every danger, identified or potential, generates a fear that can grow into hostility toward any given innovation or activity.

The final parameter is the pervasiveness of uncertainty. It was not absent from the regime of risk, but it was at least contained and accepted (or not, as the case may be). In the current climate, uncertainty prevails, and it is becoming impossible to make decisions, as the danger cannot be clearly evaluated.

Although public opinion developed this grammar of threat to construct its relationship to danger, it did so largely despite itself. This situation is neither comfortable nor convenient. It places everyone in a state of total vulnerability: henceforth unable to be the subject of an action based on an accepted evaluation of risk, we see ourselves as the object of a threat from which it is often not possible to protect ourselves. Faced with these invisible, incalculable dangers, the only way out for anyone whose reasoning follows the regime of threat is to apply the precautionary principle. In this case, that means not acting, rather than waiting for potential consequences which may or may not happen but which—it is believed—are dangerous, and if they did come about, would allow no going back.

## 1.4 FROM RISK TO THREAT: A PARADIGM SHIFT?

The transition from the regime of risk to the regime of threat is not a one-way street. It is neither universal nor irreversible. It is not as if we had the regime of risk on one side, which continues to be applied and explained only by institutional actors and experts, and the regime of threat on the other, to which public opinion had defected en masse. The two regimes coexist, in permanently unstable equilibrium, and their respective proportion varies depending on the subject.

### 1.4.1 Echoes of other systems of perception

The representations of our relationship to danger echo other systems of perception that further reinforce and amplify the danger. The observed hostility to innovation or industrial activities resonates with other perceived fields of vulnerability and insecurity.

Two different but complementary registers of public perception also weigh in favor of a relationship to danger structured by the grammar of threat.

The first such register stems from the difficulties governments have in protecting their populations: for public opinion, these difficulties are linked to the hegemony of the world of speculative finance in a globalized economy, depriving the State of its traditional powers and its protective capability.

This domination of financial logic — already observed as a factor in steering public perceptions towards the regime of threat, through a whole series of formative crises — is the second register. It nurtures the idea that risk prevention will always be trumped by the pursuit of financial interests. For public opinion, this situation can logically lead institutional actors and experts to behave irresponsibly from the point of view of risk prevention.

**“THE GRAMMARS OF THREAT AND OF RISK WILL COEXIST: IT IS ONLY WHEN THE GRAMMAR OF THREAT WINS OUT THAT REJECTION — MATERIALIZED BY FALLING BACK ON THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE— PREDOMINATES. WHEN THE GRAMMAR OF RISK TAKES PRECEDENCE, ACCEPTABILITY IS NO LONGER A CORE CONCERN.”**

### 1.4.2 Rules of coexistence between risk and threat

The regime of threat generates anxiety, but it also generates an inability to act. If it were to spread to every issue that comes into the public eye as regards the acceptability of activities or innovations, it would cause numerous difficulties. Such difficulties do exist in many areas, but not every topic is exclusively interpreted using the grammar of threat: for every subject (GMOs, medications, vaccines, fracking, alcohol, tobacco, cellphones, etc.), the grammars of threat and of risk will coexist: it is only when the grammar of threat wins out that rejection —materialized by falling back on the precautionary principle —predominates. When the grammar of risk takes precedence, acceptability is no longer a core concern.

The first factor that “brings us back” to the regime of risk is our capacity for denial: to be constantly aware that we are under threat, and that we have no way of avoiding danger, is more than we can cope with. Denial allows us to disregard danger, to put it in context, to avoid thinking about it; an attitude that enables us to live without giving in to panic. It operates, for example, in the case of food, where we find assertions like *“If you start worrying about what you’re eating, you may as well stop eating altogether”*. This attitude allows us to live with danger, not by calculating the probability of the risk, but by relegating it to the backs of our minds.

The second factor, crucial in steering perceptions of danger back towards the regime of risk, lies in the perception of the benefits (utility or pleasure) associated with a given situation or activity. How else can we explain the consumption of tobacco, of which the dangers are absolutely clear and long established? Cellphones are also the subject of debate concerning the health impact of microwaves, but the benefits they offer are such that their use is not significantly limited by perceptions of the risks posed by electromagnetic radiation. The hostility in this area is focused on the relay antennas, which crystallize neighborhood reactions, reactions that overlook the individual and collective benefits of mobile telephony. The same type of reasoning is in evidence with vaccines, where the perceived individual risks outweigh the collective benefits which are, almost by definition, more abstract.

The balance between risk and threat may also depend on cultural attitudes: if we compare Germany and France on the topics of nuclear power and waste incineration, for example, we find the levels of acceptance and hostility reflected as mirror images.



### 1.4.3 “Public opinion is irrational”

Institutional actors and experts often conclude, when they fail to win the public over, that public opinion is irrational. This assertion does not hold water; public opinion is certainly not irrational, and why would it be? While certain attitudes may appear irrational, this is not because public opinion is “inherently” irrational: when the conditions that underpin that vital trust are not met, public opinion is deprived of the resources for constructing a rational line of conduct.

Under these unfavorable conditions, public opinion has developed a new analytical framework, and its findings are rarely aligned with what the experts would expect. This new grammar of threat, given the discomfort it causes, cannot be understood as voluntary or as a rational hostility to the regime of risk. While it may be instrumentalized by certain actors to develop opposition to a particular activity, public opinion does not have any conscious voluntary intention of adopting this new way of apprehending danger.

Whenever the divergences between experts and public opinion result in an impasse, one must examine both lines of reasoning: if the risk model no longer holds, then we must consider the threat model. Our analytical framework offers a simple explanation for recurrent problems: risk-based reasoning and argument has no sway over public opinion when the latter thinks in terms of threat. If Germans want to be understood by the Chinese, they can always exhort them to learn German, but it might be more efficient for the Germans to learn Chinese. That is currently the alternative facing institutional actors and experts if they want to be understood again by a public that no longer speaks their language.



## 2. FACTORS FOR CHANGE

Do divergences between institutional actors/experts and public opinion inevitably lead to an impasse? Deadlock is a satisfactory outcome for no-one: government agencies and businesses alike are prevented from acting and moving forward; public opinion is placed in a state of worry and suspicion; and the efforts of the former to persuade the latter often prove counterproductive.

Certain parameters need to be examined and worked on, if we are to have any hope of resolving these divergences.

The first element to consider is the attitude of young people to danger. Perhaps it is in the very nature of the young to develop an attitude to danger that differs from the previous generation and to spontaneously take a more positive approach to innovation and progress. Whether this is the case or not, the study suggests that the generation born after the major crises that spawned the climate of doubt—a generation which in many cases never knew the era when perceptions of danger were generally organized by the regime of risk—developed a different attitude to danger-related situations, based on a greater willingness to live with uncertainty and the construction of a viewpoint on every situation that is accepted as being fragile and likely to change. Young people describe the way they assess the danger of a situation in these terms: using all available media levers to get a roundup of different viewpoints; consulting and sharing opinions with peers; and deciding on a position, which may then be tested and challenged by the same process, in response to some new event.

The second element relates to the state of distrustfulness in which public opinion is immersed, and the conditions it now lays down before any institutional or expert voice can be given a hearing. The first condition is a question of posture: the speaker must demonstrate his or her capacity for empathy with the public, an understanding of people’s experiences, viewpoints, and beliefs. Any peremptory posture is doomed to fail from the outset. The second condition flows from the first, and concerns the modes of discussion and argumentation that can be adopted; just as peremptory postures are rejected, so also strongly categorical positions no longer have credibility. When it comes to risk, there are no longer any simple certainties, and it is essential to leave room for doubt: admitting that doubt exists generates credibility and thereafter, potentially, reassurance.

## 3. INTERIM CONCLUSION

Once bitten, twice shy... that tends to be the public attitude on topics involving questions of danger. Public opinion is wary of experts, institutions, and truths... It will no longer listen to authoritarian posturing or official speechifying. In apprehending danger, it is reluctant to believe in the risk models that were found wanting in the past. It takes refuge instead in a highly uncomfortable regime of threat, in which the pervasiveness of uncertainty prevents it from accepting what it is told by institutional actors and experts.

In the construction of danger, grammars of risk and grammars of threat now exist side by side. Insisting exclusively on the first as though the second did not exist is a recipe for a dialogue of the deaf. It is a dead-end strategy. The road to change travels through the rebuilding of trust: trust can no longer be taken for granted—it has to be developed through a complex relationship founded on respect.

## 4. PROJECTS IN THE LIGHT OF THIS ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The risk/threat framework can be applied to any type of project: it provides a tool for diagnosing or, better, anticipating how public opinion is likely to crystallize around a project, and the risks involved.

To this end, the framework must be applied in two distinct phases:

- Examining the characteristics of the project and of its environment, in order to analyze the representations likely to be formed by public opinion;
- Identifying the sets of actors, already present or liable to intervene, and (especially) the logic of the media, due to its influence on opinion-shaping mechanisms.

On the basis of these analyses, project holders can put together their communication strategies.

### 4.1 THE REPRESENTATIONS FORMED BY PUBLIC OPINION

The consequences of applying the danger/threat model weigh heavily on the development of public opinion about a project, particularly as they feed into several phenomena that are directly related (the incalculability of danger) or indirectly implied (the loss of trust in institutions, the suspicion of conflicts of interest). This last sentiment derives particularly from the perceived pervasiveness of financial logic, dictating its rules to the economy and to political institutions, to the detriment of collective concerns (the environment, health, etc.), which are relegated to second place.

As a result, public opinion doubts everything: experts, institutions, past and current truths... In its approach to many topics, it is reluctant to believe in the risk models that were found wanting in the past. In the regime of threat, the pervasiveness of uncertainty prevents it from accepting what it is told by institutional actors and experts.

This chasm of understanding goes to the heart of many disputes. To narrow the gap, we must build new relationships between stakeholders, of a kind that will create the conditions for renewed dialogue and, potentially, renewed trust.

In a project context, it is crucial to anticipate these divergences: this involves analyzing all of the representations that might be associated with a project, and measuring to what extent the arguments in favor of the project may or may not come into conflict with these representations.

### 4.2 THE INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA

Several sets of actors, around any project, can be influential in shaping public perceptions, but the media play a determining role.

The workings of the media are a key mechanism in all public opinion phenomena, as the media's status as the central purveyor of information makes them key actors in shaping opinion.

Two different logics, with cumulative consequences, are at work here: that of the media's economic requirements, which construct a particular way of handling information, and that of the new era of instant communication.

We have already touched on two ways of handling information, specific to the economic imperatives of broadcasting, which offer fertile ground for the construction of opinion. The first is the importance of revelation, which takes precedence over the actual facts; the second is the well-known media adage that good news is no news. This mode of functioning — driven by viewer, listener or reader numbers — focuses the media

spotlight on scares and on alarmist voices, providing a potentially constraining negative prism for the networks of meaning formed by projects and subjects.

The actual form of the information produced by the media also tends to exacerbate the alarmist nature of the messages it carries, as the format makes it difficult to express nuance or complexity. The media processing of information tends towards extreme simplification.

The era of instant media communication relies on technological foundations that enable constant availability of access to any content produced anywhere in the world. Media channels are gradually converging, to merge all uses together on a single terminal, but two different production approaches are still in evidence: that of the media from the conventional sphere, which handle continuous flows of news and information, and that of the decentralized production of content via social media. With the social networks, and through instantaneity, new ways of constructing and sharing information are coming into play: a change of nature that also induces changes in behavior, particularly in the consumption of information.

The development of the instant-media society has many consequences that are yet to be seen. For the institutional sphere, in the broadest sense, this is a source of profound destabilization, particularly as regards the disparities between the requirements of the long term which largely continues to govern the functioning of organizations, and those of the short term, which stem from these new modes of information consumption.

Upstream of any project, preparatory work must be done to avoid the deadlock that results when there is too great a discrepancy between the characteristics of the project as seen by its promoters and the representations that public opinion may have of it. The risk/threat dichotomy offers an analytical framework for situations where explanations focus on a potential danger.

**“THE RISK/THREAT FRAMEWORK CAN BE APPLIED TO ANY TYPE OF PROJECT: IT PROVIDES A TOOL FOR DIAGNOSING OR, BETTER, ANTICIPATING HOW PUBLIC OPINION IS LIKELY TO CRYSTALLIZE AROUND A PROJECT, AND THE RISKS INVOLVED.”**