

The perils of ‘uncertainty’ for fear of crime research in the twenty-first century

Introduction

The notion of ‘uncertainty’, both as a way of describing the social world within analyses of fear and as a political and journalistic buzzword, carries with it a pervasive sense of inevitability. Within these diverse contexts, it seems to provide a familiar description for almost any and every state of ‘non-knowledge’, from insecurity on a personal level to future risks calculated and imagined by the state or civil society organisations. It quickly became a stock way of framing a number of hugely significant political events during 2016, including the United Kingdom’s European Union membership referendum (‘Brexit’) and the United States (U.S.) presidential election, and continues to feature heavily in academic discourses across a range of theoretical and practical terrains. Ubiquitous inevitability of this sort has ‘piqued’ the curiosity, to use philosopher Ian Hacking’s (1995: 3) words, of a number of researchers in this and cognate fields; Lee’s (2007) work on the history of ‘fear of crime’ as an object of criminological inquiry and O’Malley’s (2004) examination of risk and uncertainty are such examples. While this chapter cannot claim to delve as deeply or systematically as these accounts, it hopes to raise a number of inquisitive questions about the uses to which ‘uncertainty’ may, or may not, be put at this particular juncture in relation to fear of crime and anxiety more broadly.

The chapter is split into four sections. The first describes something of a drift toward ‘uncertainty’ within criminology either as its object of analysis, or, within cognate social science disciplines, for its explanatory power in so-called ‘late modernity’. The chapter then juxtaposes these framings of ‘unknowability’ with an indicative, albeit provocative and generalised, reappraisal of enduring patterns of structural inequalities which continue to intersect with everyday anxieties and fear. Acknowledging the shortcomings of such an approach, it goes on to consider some of the ways in which the language of ‘uncertainty’ has featured in recent political discourse¹ – a discourse which itself melds with, and has been melded by, physical and emotional states of ‘uncertainty’ *qua* anxiety in the aftermath of ‘Brexit’ and the election of Donald Trump in the United States. Finally, reiterating the myriad ways ‘uncertainty’ may be employed in fear research, the distinction is briefly and heuristically acknowledged between macro and micro levels of analysis. The chapter concludes by suggesting that despite – or rather because of – the ubiquity of ‘uncertainty’, both analytically

within the social sciences and politically in mainstream discourse, its deployment in fear research remains problematic.

The inevitability of ‘uncertainty’ within analyses of fear?

It has long been argued that fear of crime research must adopt a more holistic approach than one which merely focuses on apprehensions about, or even direct experiences of, crime (see, *inter alia*, Garofalo and Laub 1978; Hollway and Jefferson 1997; Walklate 1998; Stanko 2000; Walklate and Mythen 2008; Farrall, Jackson and Gray 2009). Through both the heterogeneous historical trajectories of critical criminology (see Mooney 2012) and more recent developments in zemiology (Hillyard, Pantazis, Tombs and Gordon 2004; Hillyard and Tombs 2007; Lasslett 2010; Pemberton 2015), a key reason for this holism is that we should not be narrowing our attention to ‘fear’, much less to fear of what is only legally recognised. This methodological and political trajectory has also been guided by a belief that to actually engage head on with what constitutes ‘fear of crime’ would necessarily require that we first study those historically situated processes and practices which brought it into being in the first place. As Lee (2007: 203) suggests in this vein: ‘Once the researchers and pollsters began enumerating crime fear and called it fear of crime [in the mid-1960s], an object was not discovered – rather, a discourse and problematisation was born; a concept was invented.’ These critiques, coupled with the oft-cited (though problematic) paradox that those least at risk of criminal victimisation are often the most fearful (Hollway and Jefferson 2000: 31), have led many researchers to shift their attention from fear of crime to more general insecurities and their concomitant effects. This shift is reflected in the now widely-held view that ‘larger political and socio-economic anxieties coalesce around and are articulated through expressions of fear of crime’ (Zedner 2006: 89), or put differently, ‘that fear of crime may be considered, at least in part, as social and economic insecurity in disguise’ (Vieno, Roccato and Russo 2013: 531). In sum, there exists something of a consensus that ‘fear of crime’ may provide an expressive conduit through which a range of complex and less easily articulated everyday anxieties and insecurities can be expressed – ‘simply because within this discourse crime is depicted as knowable, actionable and controllable’ (Gadd and Jefferson 2007: 67).

Of course, this ‘turn’ to anxiety within fear of crime literatures is not wholly distinct from a broader preoccupation with ‘risk’ and ‘uncertainty’ within the social sciences, in large part due to the influences of Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, and Zygmunt Bauman, whose analyses of so-called ‘late’ or ‘liquid’ modernity differentially emphasise ‘uncertainty’ as a

chief characteristic of contemporary social life. It is inaccurate to speak of Bauman, Beck and Giddens' respective and entire contributions as unequivocally cohesive, or that they are the only theorists responsible for the trajectories posited here; the 'body' of their work referred to here is that which, it is argued, partly helped to usher into criminological parlance a general acceptance of 'uncertainty' as both a universal characteristic of, and apt way of describing, modern life.² Critics, proponents and somewhat agnostic readers of their work alike have drawn on their ideas in relation to disparate and distinct issues, but it is fair to say it has had considerable uptake in fear and fear of crime debates both positively and negatively (see, *inter alia*, Hollway and Jefferson 1997; Walklate 1998; Tudor 2003; Walklate and Mythen 2008; Gadd and Jefferson 2009; Critcher 2011). It has also contributed to the seemingly interchangeable use of 'uncertainty' and 'anxiety', the ascendancy of which extends to sociological debates more broadly (see Wilkinson 2001).

In many ways this is unsurprising, not least of all because of their respective work on violence and fear (Bauman 2002; 2006), risk (Beck 1992; 1999) and ontological security/existential anxiety (Giddens 1991) and the links therein drawn by both the authors themselves and academics utilising their work. For Bauman (2002: 53; 2007), we are living in an 'age of uncertainty' where separating violence from subtler forms of coercion is impossible; fear is intensified by its 'diffuse' and 'free-floating' nature (Bauman 2006: 2). Not knowing (*nichtwissen* in Beck's terms, see Mythen and Walklate 2013) is a central feature of this social landscape: "Fear" is the name we give to our *uncertainty*: to our *ignorance* of the threat and of what is to be *done* – what can and can't be – to stop it in its tracks – or to fight it back if stopping it is beyond our power' (Bauman 2006: 2, emphases in original). Overarching and intersecting themes across their work, such as individualisation, self-reflexivity and the perpetual renegotiation of identity, implicitly and explicitly highlight the notion of 'uncertainty' as a general feature of social life across a wide range of contexts (see for example McGuigan 2006: 219; Mythen 2005: 134).

One (among many) of the legacies of this oeuvre, for which it has received widespread criticism, is its role in diminishing class as an analytic category of relevance (see Atkinson 2007a; 2007b; 2008), largely through overstating breaks, as opposed to highlighting continuities, with insecurities of the past. Integral to these suggested breaks has, of course, been risk, the more catastrophic and future-oriented permutations of which have served as something of an ongoing theoretical spectre which continue to frame many terms of debate within fear of crime literatures. This almost automatic coupling within criminology has often led to an over-individualised and ahistorical analysis of fear. As Tombs and Whyte (2006) argue, Beck's risk

society thesis wrongly finds novelty in the risks and hazards of a so-called new modernity, ignoring the integral part insecurity has always played in ‘class societies’ since the emergence of capitalism (see also Rigakos and Hadden 2001; Rigakos 2001). This failure to ground analyses materially in a broader political economy of risk (Mythen 2004; 2014) has ensured that the risk society thesis has contributed to a more widespread marginalisation of economic class analyses within the social sciences (Tombs and Whyte 2006: 188; in a bid to develop what he felt were more apposite theoretical frames of reference, Beck himself famously declared class to be a ‘zombie category’ living on in social accounts of the modern world long after its death – see Gane 2004: 152). In a similar vein, Critcher (2011: 268–69) maligns Beck and Giddens’ theories of risk in his search for a political economy of moral panics for overlooking important aspects of capitalism and the mass media.

In such critiques of the ‘late/liquid modernity’ theses highlighted here we see attempts to speak more concretely of the social world and to materialise otherwise abstract questions rather than taking their suppositions for granted. Through couching a range of *comparatively* tangible insecurities in the equally ambiguous language of ‘uncertainty’, fear research in its many guises loses its analytical edge in much the same way as these critiques warn against. Moreover, as with any all-encompassing ‘concept’, it often provides such generalised frames of debate that the framing becomes normalised out of sight. This becomes problematic when we apparently no longer question either its suitability or usefulness; instead it becomes inevitable. ‘Uncertainty’ it seems represents a case in point. As Wilkinson (2001: 3) put it at the turn of the century, ‘it is commonly accepted that, rather than learning to cope with such conditions [of ‘high anxiety’], we are in fact becoming more vulnerable to experiencing our world as a place of threatening uncertainty.’ But is this really the case? Where, and when, is this the case? To whom does this apply? What can this add to our analyses? What are the dangers of universally accepting what will always be, in many ways, a general truism of human existence lived in the shadow of nuclear threat, diplomatic crises, food shortages and countless other humanitarian emergencies around the world? As O’Malley (2004: 178–181) concludes in his genealogy of risk and uncertainty, the ‘age of uncertainty’ premonitions associated with the risk society are macro-sociological constructs which tend to mask the undulations of everyday life and people’s perceptions within it. Commenting on the work of Francois Ewald, O’Malley (2004: 179) states: ‘As with Ulrich Beck’s work, no evidence is presented about whether ‘modern society’ (let alone a large number of people) has undergone such a change of consciousness. It is simply assumed to have happened.’

Insecurities mediated by structural violence – an ‘uncertain’ relationship?

Set against this cautionary backdrop, evidence of 'fear' seems abundant. While the ambiguous language of 'uncertainty' proliferates within academic terminologies around fear vis-a-vis anxiety, is there not much we can say with some degree of certainty? Particularly if we accept that everyday insecurities precipitate the kinds of anxiety which appear in crime surveys as 'fear'. Widespread exploitation and economic insecurity, particularly for those forced into precarious, inadequately paid, part-time or non-existent labour 'opportunities' (e.g. workfare schemes), has steadily continued to worsen in tandem with the notorious 'wars' on crime, drugs and terror – the effects of which have been predictably disastrous though variegated across gender, race and class lines (Rigakos 2016: 1). This widening inequality across multiple spheres of public and private life represents a general continuity since the 1970s, accelerated markedly by the economic crisis of 2008–9 (Rigakos 2016: 1) – a continuity many critics on the left hoped would be transient (Brown 2015: 295). Against this economic backdrop, data from a range of countries has exhibited links between poverty, inequality and feelings of insecurity relating to crime (see, for example, Pantazis 2000; Kristjansson 2007; Larsson 2009; Vieno *et al.* 2013; Vauclair and Bratanova 2016). Broader anxieties are clearly evident in studies of post-industrial, working class communities displaced or reshaped by 'explosive gentrification' (Jeffery 2016: 6), where top-down targeting of such populations as not only physical but cultural obstacles for regenerative efforts also exacerbate greater risks of criminal victimisation (Hancock 2007). The consequences of these worsening socio-economic conditions has been clearly linked with increased levels of violence and harm, including lower life expectancies, drug dependency and mental health issues in countries with higher levels of inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010).

Fears and anxieties aggravated by divisive racialised security practices and policies also bear shameful continuities. As Ahmed (2015) has recently argued and depicted through in-depth interview data with British Muslims, the contemporary 'war on terror' both represents and provokes an array of emotional responses including, though not limited to, fear and anxiety on the part of those primarily targeted by its policies. This consolidates considerable amounts of research which has consistently pointed to similar feelings among British Muslim communities (for example Mythen, Walklate and Khan 2012) which, incredibly varied and differentially reported as these feelings are (O'Toole, Meer, DeHanas, Jones and Modood 2016), represents a disturbing pattern. Concomitantly, fear and anxiety expressed by Muslims in relation to online abuse intersects with that experienced in the physical world (Awan and

Zempi 2015). In recent decades, the manifest racism reported in such studies often increases following either high-profile terror attacks on civilians (though typically not those perpetrated by the far-right which often receive less sustained media coverage framing those events as terror attacks) and/or the introduction of new counterterrorism policies. Moreover, as Burnett (2016) highlights in relation to post-Brexit racial violence, the xenoracism such policies often engender is quickly abstracted from their longer embedded histories and disavowed as exceptional by the very same political leaders and media corporations who were often instrumental in their propagation. Here again, we can glimpse the connections between socioeconomic and political transformations and individual responses to labile experiential conditions.

Walby, Towers and Francis' (2016) methodological interventions into the criminal victimisation survey also paint a bleak picture in relation to gendered violence. Disaggregating and 'uncapping' previously 'capped' statistical Crime Survey for England and Wales data, their research (aside from revealing the historically gendered prejudice of the survey itself) shows not only that violent crime against women and by domestic perpetrators has increased, but that the timing of this increase corresponds with the global economic crisis of 2008–9 (see also True 2012). Their findings are consistent with explanations suggesting that difficulties of leaving violent relationships or households are exacerbated by increased inequality and lower income levels (Walby *et al.* 2016: 1228). Coupled with the fact that both women's ability to escape domestic violence and the support provision they might access once they do is negatively and disproportionately impacted by funding cuts (Walby *et al.* 2016: 1228; Walby and Towers 2012); the potential for already terrifying situations for many women to get even worse are clear (on the more complex relationship between fear and resistance within the privacy of abusive relationships, however, see Pain 2014). Recent empirical evidence such as this which takes account of the structural violence of austerity usefully consolidates earlier conceptual moves in feminist theory which materialised male power along a continuum in its non-spectacular and everyday context (Kelly 1988). Indeed, the 'ordinariness' of these violent encounters and their tacit negotiation documented by Stanko (1985) over 30 years ago bear greater continuity today than novelty.

The point of reiterating such abundantly clear evidence is not to suggest that anxieties mediated along structural (and intersectional) lines have been neglected by fear of crime scholars (see for example Fanghanel 2016). Nor is it to deny that fear and anxiety are experienced and mediated in acutely specific ways, that individuals exercise agency when traversing them, or that anxiety and structural inequalities of the kind indicatively

acknowledged here are not always causally linked. Of course, situationally-triggered or transitory fears (Gabriel and Greve 2003: 601) are experienced along structurally-transmitted lines, while structural drivers of anxiety cannot but manifest themselves in specific and differentially contextualised experiences and practices which are complex and changing phenomena. Rather, it is to suggest that such trends have important political and ethical implications for the analytic accent we choose to place on ‘uncertainty’ as researchers. If ‘the politics of fear [. . .] are increasingly imagined in relation to an uncertain and unknowable future’ (Aradau and van Munster 2009: 11), then familiar (though dynamic) patterns of both harm and fearmongering which continue to shape people’s anxieties become crucial narratives with which to challenge such growing and widespread acceptance of unknowability. As this chapter has already alluded to, this is a cautionary rather than accusatory note; in much the same way as obsessions with risk can result in hyper-individualised and apolitical analyses, fear of crime research should speak more ‘positively’ of observable social harms (Hillyard and Tombs 2007: 21), particularly as they relate to anxiety under neoliberal capitalism (Neilson 2015).

Of course, this is no straightforward or uniform task. Documenting the mounting, non-spectacular insecurities facing the public today as a result of business malpractices, for example, even when they feed into and out of their fears and anxieties, is unlikely to elicit the ‘visceral reaction from either the media or the public that compares with identity fraud, still less with other areas of “moral panic” such as paedophilia’ (Levi 2006: 1055). As with other areas of zemiological research, the relationship between harms we know to be structurally violent – often ‘issues which do not stir the emotions of the public’ (Cricher 2011: 261) – their mediation, and resistance to them in public and private spheres can be fraught, often serving to further legitimate hegemonic control (Rothe and Kauzlarich 2018: 360). How individuals affected by such violence feel, how they go about ‘going on’ (Giddens 1991: 35), and how those not immediately affected by it choose to respond, or not, are all important questions and vast areas of enquiry. However, to reiterate, we gain little in the way of clarity by adopting ‘uncertainty’, whose changing meaning within a fear of crime context is ambiguous and deserves ongoing critical interrogation.

The language (and weaponisation?) of ‘uncertainty’ in neoliberal society

In thinking through the problematic ascendancy of ‘uncertainty’, both in existing literature and potential future trajectories of fear of crime research, it would be a mistake to narrow our focus

to academic terminologies or to isolate this ascendancy from actual world events. It continues to represent something of a discursive motif in the way mainstream politics and world news is both disseminated and analysed. It was used extensively by politicians and journalists before, during and after the 2016 European Union membership referendum in Britain and the American presidential election of the same year to describe seemingly anything and everything from observable fluctuations in economic markets and the relative strength of currencies, to inconclusive and often inaccurate poll ratings and, crucially, in lieu of knowledge about longer-term consequences. It featured especially heavily in economic commentaries on prospective forecasting, as in the following statement from the International Monetary Fund (IMF 2016: 1):

The outcome of the U.K. vote [to leave the European Union], which surprised global financial markets, implies the materialization of an important downside risk for the world economy. As a result, the global outlook for 2016–17 has worsened, despite the better-than-expected performance in early 2016. This deterioration reflects the expected macroeconomic consequences of a sizable increase in uncertainty, including on the political front. This uncertainty is projected to take a toll on confidence and investment, including through its repercussions on financial conditions and market sentiment more generally. [. . .] With “Brexit” still very much unfolding, the extent of uncertainty complicates the already difficult task of macroeconomic forecasting.

This is a familiar response, albeit to a less than routine political event. Such rhetoric from an economic viewpoint is broadly commensurate with accounts suggesting that under neoliberalism, with its emphasis on entrepreneurialism, ‘uncertainty’ has increasingly come to replace risk as the new governing rationality (O’Malley 2004: 55). The language used in the above quotation – ‘a sizeable increase in uncertainty’, for example – simultaneously implies an approximated capacity with knowable boundaries *and* the inherent absence of knowledge.³ It evinces something of the discursive complexity alluded to by Dillon (2007: 45) in his account of contingency as a ‘set of truth-telling practices – about the knowledge of uncertainty’.

Beyond economics, the IMF’s reference to ‘uncertainty, including on the political front’, is telling and acts as a signifier to the broader climate of the moment which at the time of writing pervades the present too – a climate indeed characterised by anxiety and fear. Day after day throughout 2016 news broadcasts, economic musings and media commentaries about the ‘uncertain’ future of Europe and America’s markets intermingled with discussions of the

more emotive topics which proved decisive for the 'Leave' campaign's victory in Britain and Donald Trump's election success in America. These 'democratic' landmarks showcased what law professor Michael Dougan, commenting specifically on 'Brexit' and the 'Leave' campaign, lambasted as 'dishonesty on an industrial scale' (Lusher 2016). Reflecting the year's tumultuous context of political knowledge production, 'post-truth' was duly coined by Oxford Dictionaries as their 'Word of the Year', defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'.⁴ In his essay *Politics as a Vocation*, Max Weber famously referred to the dynamics of British politics during the early twentieth century as a 'dictatorship resting on the exploitation of mass emotionality' (Weber 1948: 107). Emotion management, whether systematic and premeditated, or opportunistic and spontaneous (or both) is scarcely a new phenomenon in Western politics and we are seeing both the intended and unintended production of mass states of uncertainty *qua* fear and anxiety, in addition to statements about uncertainty *qua* global financial markets.

'Uncertainty' is necessarily ill-defined because of its ambiguous nature (partially illustrated by its synonymous interplay with 'anxiety' in the fear of crime literature) while at the same time seeming ubiquitous (partially due to its coupling with 'risk' and 'fear'). This familiar clustering of words ('fear', 'anxiety', 'risk', 'uncertainty') bear several hallmarks of what cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1983) termed 'keywords'.⁵ For Williams, keywords are simultaneously familiar and complex words, whose changing historical meanings may not be immediately apparent when divorced from the context and practices surrounding their variegated uses. They often exhibit intrinsic links to other words, either by some 'specialist' area or because of their frequency in everyday language, producing word lists or groupings which often appear together (Williams 1983: 25). They may contradict one another or be used synonymously, but either way reveal a pattern of usage indicative of the historical context in which they are (or were) used. As McGuigan and Moran (2014: 173) explain: 'Williams demonstrates the performativity of language, showing how language strains and changes at the limits in order to enable new ways of seeing and acting; and is stretched and adapted in order to accommodate and create new practices and experiences'. Importantly for Williams, clarification of difficult words through more sophisticated definition does not resolve the practical disputes they seek to describe; clarifying what we mean by 'class', for example, will do little to resolve actual class disputes (Williams 1983: 24). Consequently, efforts to better define what we mean by 'uncertainty' or its numerous synonyms are futile if success is measured in terms of how effectively they can resolve everyday concerns pertaining to those

phenomena. In short, ‘uncertainty’ is a word whose changing meaning is bound up with the changing nature of the problem it aims to describe (McGuigan and Moran 2014: 173).

Many political claims and counterclaims made during the U.K. referendum and U.S. presidential election, some of which were totally fabricated, evocatively hinged on matters of security and the generation of fear among and toward a range of demonised populations, including the scapegoating of refugees, asylum-seekers and immigrants. In his presidential announcement speech, Donald Trump infamously lambasted Mexican immigrants, claiming that ‘They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists’ (Washington Post Staff 2015). Similarly, in the run up to the 2016 Australian federal election, immigration minister Peter Dutton attacked the Green party’s proposal to admit an additional 50,000 refugees, who he claimed ‘won’t be numerate or literate in their own language, let alone English’, on the grounds that some would be taking Australian jobs while many would inevitably ‘languish in unemployment queues and on Medicare and the rest of it’ (Karp 2016). The political and emotional climate surrounding these debates was, and continues to be, incredibly diverse. It is clear, however, that arguments around border controls and deportation powers, which accompanied ludicrous and often overtly racist appeals to ‘take back’ previously ‘great’ nations,⁶ generated strong emotional responses including hate and fear. It is against this backdrop that we saw public attacks on minority groups, including a surge in racial violence (Burnett 2016) and spikes in recorded homophobic hate crimes (Townsend 2016). In the U.S., Donald Trump’s rallies became ever-spectacular, in part due to frequent outbreaks of violence between supporters and protestors. While hostilities of this kind have resulted in heightened anxiety and fear among many, it seems illogical and reductive to try and couch them in ‘fear of crime’ terms, even where criminal acts have surely occurred. Doing so risks stripping them of their wider political context, reducing them to standalone, isolated acts requiring standalone, isolated criminal justice solutions. It does little to situate them within broader historical conflicts or contemporary struggles against tyranny which continue either in spite, or because, of this fear and anxiety. As Lee (2011: 124) suggests, the comfortable proximity shared between the language associated with ‘fear of crime’ and law and order debates should make us sceptical. In a similar vein, should not the constant use of ‘uncertainty’ by politicians and the media and the concomitant ease with which social injustice assumes the place of collateral damage during ‘times of uncertainty’ make us wary?

The regular use of ‘uncertainty’ as a catchall referent by political and media analysts of recent seismic events and its increased uptake within fear of crime literatures discussed above are neither necessarily discrete, nor automatically interlinked. That said, we should remain alert

to the likelihood that ‘uncertainty’ will attract even greater usage in the coming years in academic circles because of its dynamic relationship with actual world events (many of which certainly are producing states of uncertainty) and the language used to describe them.⁷ Academic and mass media uses of ‘uncertainty’ have the capacity to affect human behaviour and vice versa in ways notably observed in relation to both fear of crime (Lee 2007) and classificatory practices more generally (see Hacking 2004). What might the implications of this be? What is gained and lost as a result of the simultaneously nebulous yet ubiquitous nature of ‘uncertainty’? How might insecurity, mediated through the language of ‘uncertainty’, function as a means of emotional governance? If, following Rigakos (2016: 5), ‘[t]he defining characteristic of capitalism [. . .] is its ability to productively sell insecurity to those it makes insecure’ (a viewpoint not incompatible with Bauman’s (2002: 73) reading of violence in an ‘age of uncertainty’), then our appraisal of these questions should proceed with caution and scepticism.

Synthesizing ‘uncertainty’ – an age-old problem for fear of crime research?

This chapter has largely contrasted, albeit somewhat simplistically, the language of ‘uncertainty’ or patterns of its use with just some of the rather more concretely observed inequalities known to contribute to people’s general anxiety. As Karen Evans argues elsewhere in this book (Chapter 16), fear of crime research has routinely conceptualised fear as an individualised response to victimisation and only partially unpacked it as a social and collective experience with long communal histories. In the face of tangible and material inequalities displaying *some level* of historical continuity, it seems strange in some ways to use such a reticent adjective as ‘uncertain’. Problematising ‘uncertainty’ along these lines reflects a predominantly political choice for fear of crime researchers by prioritising structural harms. However, like fear, this represents just one dimension of a multidimensional problem which also includes cultural, interactional and existential concerns (Walklate and Mythen 2008). Much like problems associated with risk, which are often not about risk-related phenomena *per se* but the organizational and political uses to which it is put (O’Malley 2006: 54–55), ‘uncertainty’ presents both political and methodological challenges depending on the changing context in which it used, the variable analytic emphases placed upon it, and the definitions attached to it in conjunction with our observations of the social world. It comes, as Lee (2007: 121) has aptly and analogously noted in relation to risk and fear, ‘loaded with meaning, with historical and cultural baggage’. Whilst any thoroughgoing account of people’s everyday

anxieties will attempt to attend to this diversity, such diversity remains wedded to power relations in all sorts of changing contexts (Farrall and Lee 2009: 10). It seems inevitable that at different points in time our varying emphasis on the political, cultural, interactional and existential will change too. As the discussion around language has alluded to, the inherent ambiguity of 'uncertainty' cannot be entirely divorced from the context in which it is produced and the phenomena it aims to describe – or, as is the danger, subsumes under one broad umbrella.

In critiquing the coupling of 'uncertainty' and 'anxiety' within generalised accounts of fear and contemporary politics, we must not forget that both are also natural features of social life and human existence. Despite the deliberately provocative claim that to some (macro) extent we can be 'certain' about the presence of anxiety under neoliberal capitalism, partially supported by evidence of inequalities wrought along class, race and gender lines, of course the world is uncertain. It is uncertain in the sense that it is unstable and constantly changing. It is also uncertain in that feelings of 'knowing/not knowing' and of anxiety are deeply and often profoundly felt emotions, some of which might pertain to personal safety while others may relate to existential unease more generally. In other words, for the individual the social world is uncertain in the sense that it is, to use another popular word among policy-makers and scholars interested in projections of futurity, contingent. The problem with drawing on notions of 'uncertainty' at an individual level to describe a range of unstable phenomena associated with anxiety (and therefore of interest to 'fear of crime' scholars pursuing 'fear' in all its tributary forms) is that it assumes, or at least implies, that these phenomena could be anything but unstable. Recognising that this is not the case is not to endorse the view that material inequality is inconsequential.

Assuming that unstable phenomena always have the potential to be stable is problematic at both an interactional and existential level, posing methodological challenges to the sort of 'multi-layered approach' to researching fear advocated by Walklate and Mythen (2008: 221). At a micro level, the very practices of everyday life are themselves embodied by ongoing contingency (Garfinkel [1967] 1984: 11). 'Uncertainty' or not-knowing, in this sense, is not novel but rather inescapably routine. Again, contra the late modernity theses outlined earlier, an awareness of the unpredictability and unstructured temporalities of everyday life are inherent features of our sense-making rationalities (Garfinkel [1967] 1984: 265). 'Uncertainty' may even be thought of in a positive way if it allows people to maintain optimism or hope (Brashers 2001: 478). Of course, any actions which sustain, or events which disrupt, people's

sense of routine practice vis-à-vis security are of interest to fear of crime scholars but whether the notion of ‘uncertainty’ offers a useful starting point in this regard remains a moot point.

At an existential level, the analytic use of ‘uncertainty’ to make sense of inner-worldly anxieties is also starkly incompatible with the suggestion that ‘certainty’ is, or can be, a stable feature of our inner lives (Quinney 1995). As contemplative beings, we are perpetually aware of the future, evocatively defined by Hannah Arendt as an ‘ocean of uncertainty’ (Arendt 1958: 237), in at least some of its vastness and unknowability. Similarly identifying the contingency of social and psychic life, Eric Fromm (1955: 190, emphasis in original) posited that feelings of insecurity are inescapable; thus, for Fromm, our task *‘is not to feel secure, but to be able to tolerate insecurity, without panic and undue fear.* Life, in its mental and spiritual aspects, is by necessity insecure and uncertain.’ As Quinney (1995) articulates, drawing on Fromm’s socialist humanism and existentialist philosophy more broadly, the realisation of peace in our inner and everyday lives is not contingent upon ‘knowing’ in any objective or certain sense of the word. It is partly in our shared inability to know for certain that we find our capacity for compassion and humility. Fanghanel (2016: 70–1), drawing on Julia Kristeva’s *Strangers to Ourselves*, similarly argues that while we need to resist neoliberal imperatives around security, this entails an emotional and psychic shift within ourselves – one in which alternative understandings and reconciliation of safety in public space are made possible through affectively transforming ‘self’ into ‘other’. This is an important line of argument, one which does not prescribe nor foreclose practical mechanisms by which the existential and psychological anxiety associated with neoliberalism can be quelled at an individual level – a *prerequisite* to effective political resistance (Neilson 2015: 197–98). Recognising that peace and social justice are only attainable in the absence of poverty, inequality, racism and alienation, all of which facilitate the harms we associate with crime and the criminal justice system (Quinney 1995: 155), requires what Neilson (2015: 188) terms a ‘co-existence principle’ – connecting ‘the deeper structures of capitalism with the subjectivity principle of anxiety’.

Thinking through just some of the multiple layers of meaning associated with ‘uncertainty’ also returns us to critiques of the ‘risk society’ considered in the first section of this chapter, posing a range of challenges and opportunities for future fear of crime research. As Brown (2015: 187) points out, while influential sociologists including Beck and Giddens placed ‘the problem of uncertainty at the heart of late-modern lived experiences’, they did so with reference to a distinctly (North-West) European modernisation process associated with ‘post-traditional, largely secular and liberal characteristics’ (2015: 186). Brown rightly highlights secularity as a decisive feature of this theoretically dominant worldview, one with

particularly significant implications for how we make sense of ‘uncertainty’. Uncertainties linked to ‘accidents’ and risks, including risk of criminal victimisation, are likely to look and feel very different to social actors whose faith lies not in their own agency but rather in ‘God’s will’ (Brown 2015: 187). How fear and anxiety might be rooted in, assuaged by, or negated through various and varying recourse to religious or spiritual faith in different places at different historical moments, for example, are interesting and important questions. However, their enquiry is stifled by a universal assumption of secular European Enlightenment ideals, such as risk management, ‘as a way of handling uncertain futures, as well as making sense of that which has already gone wrong’ (Brown 2015: 186). Again, how useful a starting point can ‘uncertainty’ provide for fear of crime analyses in the twenty-first century when its genesis within the social sciences is arguably such a narrow and Eurocentric one?

The point of drawing out some of the apparently antagonistic features of the ‘uncertainty/certainty’ binary is to make clear that methodological controversies, stemming partly from the differing semantic meanings attached to it and partly from its theoretical history, abound in ways pertinent to everyday anxiety and the way it is negotiated. Whether an emphasis is put on ‘fear’, ‘anxiety’, ‘risk’, or ‘uncertainty’, ascertaining our health, wellbeing and relationship to forms of structural violence (Galtung 1969) should be our priority, even while acknowledging the inevitable and natural existential concerns described here. Logically, this means that ‘fear of crime’ research as a broad church should orient its focus on pre-conditions known to facilitate the miscellaneous range of anxieties of supposed interest to it.

Conclusion

In line with well-known debates on late modernity, fear of crime has been recast as a metaphor for any number of existential anxieties symptomatic of broader social, cultural and economic shifts (Pantazis 2000: 417; Zedner 2006: 89). In many ways, the incorporation of such anxieties into analyses of fear and insecurity is a welcome move which potentially decentralises ‘fear of crime’ from a much broader set of structural harms without denying its emotional and existential reality for many people. This shift, however, has utilised a sociological lexicon which is often used to describe a diversity of unstable phenomena under the ubiquitous umbrella of ‘uncertainty’ which often assumes novelty, rather than historicity. Implicit within this discourse is a resignation that we cannot know about each and every aspect of risk facing individuals and that, even if we could, the feelings they engender are beyond our grasp in a ‘complex and globalised world’.

Against this viewpoint, we might reinvigorate debates around fear by focusing more resolutely on established, albeit complex, patterns of inequality. Doing so is crucial if we are to understand the ways in which material insecurities serve as a basis for anxiety and the various forms of emotional governance this insecurity makes possible in a neoliberal capitalist society. In a world polarised by rampant inequalities, increasing reliance on food banks, soaring personal debt, extensive casualisation of labour forces through insecure work contracts, precarious housing arrangements, savage cuts to public spending and worker discontent in the education and health sectors, there are a great many observable sources of insecurity. Punitive responses and fear mongering toward refugee and migrant populations, widespread surveillance of ethnic minority groups and increases in domestic abuse add to this list. While many of these examples support the notion, as imagined in the ‘age of uncertainty’ theses, that the world is an unstable, rapidly changing and frightening place for many, it could equally be argued that there remain sufficient continuities within established patterns of power, exploitation, inequality and injustice to seriously question the extent to which ‘uncertainty’ accurately captures our current conjuncture.

However, alongside semantic debates, imprecise knowledge about the future remains an existential fact of both the human condition (Arendt 1958: 237; Quinney 1995) and of our everyday sense-making rationalities (Garfinkel [1967] 1984: 265); applied in this way ‘uncertainty’ might seem to capture perfectly well the subjective and psychological states of, in this case, anxiety vis-à-vis fear of crime. The first note of caution, therefore, concerns methodological clarity and the careful delineation of what is meant, and at what levels of analyses, by ‘uncertainty’. Embedded within this part of the research process are the implications of how we choose to deploy language.

As this chapter has briefly sketched out, this choice is not static, nor is it insulated from unfolding world events in which the political language of ‘uncertainty’ carries both logistical currency and emotional resonance. Cynical attempts on the part of politicians to buy time in the face of diplomatic crises, or seemingly vacuous speculation on the part of global economic organisations, may reverberate through some levels of civil society. In others, it may barely register a murmur in the face of coping with everyday precarity. If, however, following Wendy Brown (2015: 295), our task is to find ways of reclaiming the near future from the immediacy of neoliberalism, we might at least start symbolically by refusing to adopt the same language as those bound up with the business of maintaining the status quo. This alone will not be sufficient to alleviate its material harms but would surely encourage us all to look up instead of sideways.

Notes

¹ I am grateful to Dave Whyte and Roy Coleman at the University of Liverpool for thought-provoking discussions on this topic and for Roy's excellent collaborative online blog *States, Power, Emotion* which has sparked much debate on some of the topics briefly touched upon here – see <https://emotionalstates.wordpress.com/>

² Generally understood to be Giddens and Bauman's later work which departs from earlier engagements with class, whereas Beck's denial of economically classed society represents a more fundamental and constant theme in the context of his life's work (see Atkinson 2007b, 2008 and 2007a respectively). It must be emphasised that their work on 'late' or 'liquid' modernity cannot be held solely responsible for this broad adoption of 'uncertainty' as a shorthand way of describing contemporary social life (for detailed analyses see O'Malley 2004; Zinn 2008). It is, however, seminal.

³ Another example of this seeming ambiguity, which offers an authoritative statement of sorts while simultaneously insuring against its own falsity, can be found in the way former Metropolitan Police Service Commissioner Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe addressed public concerns about the ongoing terror threat after attacks around Europe and the subsequent increase in firearms officers in London. Despite favourably appraising the UK's gun control laws, assuredly suggesting the difficulty of attaining firearms in the UK relative to continental Europe, and describing the relationship between UK police and intelligence agencies as a 'world-beater', Hogan-Howe claimed that a future terrorist attack was inevitable – 'a case of when, not if' (BBC, 2016).

⁴ See <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>

⁵ The impetus for thinking about Williams' work in this context came from an engaging workshop discussion at the University of Liverpool with Marie Moran.

⁶ Specific examples include an 'anti-EU' campaign poster championed by the then UKIP leader Nigel Farage, on which the words 'BREAKING POINT The EU has failed us all' and 'We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders' overlay an image of queuing refugees, displaying discursive and aesthetic similarities with Nazi propaganda footage (see Stewart and Mason 2016); general appeals to a kind of nostalgic sentiment and yearning for prosperity of bygone eras were encompassed in Donald Trump's 'Make America Great Again' campaign slogan.

⁷ Indeed, this has already happened insofar as there are numerous established eponymous journals, books, colloquia etc. focusing on 'uncertainty', in much the same way as happened in relation to fear of crime.

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