

David L. Altheide.

Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis.

Aldine de Gruyter, 2002, 223 pp.

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Despite some notable exceptions such as Norbert Elias, sociologists have generally paid little attention to emotions and the way they figure in social life. This is surprising given the focus of much classical sociology on the ways people are tied normatively to social groups, a process that, as Elias recognized, takes place in large measure through the socialization of sentiments and feelings. The situation is beginning to change as the postmodern turn continues to question the conceit of modernity's rational foundations, and the side-effects of instrumental reason have manifested themselves in the form of new social, ecological, and ethical problems. The growing sociological focus on emotions is highly selective, however, and one emotion in particular has been singled out for consideration, fear. *Creating Fear* is the most recent of a recent series of books addressing the social and cultural currency of fear in the latest phase of modernity. What distinguishes Altheide's approach is that he is not interested in fear *per se* so much as the discourse of fear, fear as a interpretative frame or optic through which people see the world, define the social situations they confront, construct identities (their own and others'), and structure their interactions.

Altheide sees the discourse of fear as something that has become publicly more pervasive in recent years, particularly in the U.S. but also elsewhere in modern society. Tracking references to fear in various newspapers since the 1980s, Altheide argues that there has been not only a quantitative increase in the frequency with which the term is used, but also a qualitative shift in how it is used. Increasingly, fear is used not only in a specific sense to represent discrete instances or events—what Altheide calls “parallel fear”—but also more generally and metaphorically to characterize the broader social context in which these events are embedded—“non-parallel fear.” It is the latter that points to the development of fear discourse as a dominant resource in the construction of frames for public discourse and, by implication, private life. To substantiate his argument Altheide looks at the growth of news coverage of crime, and provides a detailed examination of several case studies—focused especially on the victimization of children—to illustrate how fear is incorporated as a central feature of the framing process.

The growth of fear discourse stems partly from the way fear itself is easily universalized as an axis of identification; it cuts across different objects and fields, and provides a convenient way to articulate a common experience and identity at a time when conventional forms of social commonality seem to be in retreat. By itself, however, this explanation cannot account fully for the current growth of fear discourse. Recent fear discourse, Altheide argues, results primarily from the growing power of the media and popular culture as sources of social understanding and identity. Fear discourse represents the way that “media logic” is increasingly dependent on an “entertainment format” to attract audiences and generate profits. The entertainment format stresses visual over linguistic communication, the evocation of emotions over referential information, and the accentuation of the drama and excitement of events over their social and historical context. The media rely on fear discourse because it resonates

with audiences by representing social problems in terms of simplistic victim and villain stereotypes that are conducive to the personalization of blame and the promotion of coercive forms of social control as the solution to social threats. In this way, fear discourse also benefits elite interests in the intensification of control and legitimates the unequal distribution of social power.

Altheide has some interesting observations to make about the growth of fear discourse, and he has a sharp eye for the nuances of media discourse. Nevertheless, *Creating Fear* reads like a book that was hastily put together. The discussion is often repetitious and the chapters lack a strong sense of sequential logic and continuity. The central argument about the relationship between fear discourse and the media is loosely framed and the various aspects of the explanation lack consistent integration. At times, for example, Altheide uses political economy to explain the relationship between fear discourse, the entertainment format and media logic, seeing the relationship variously as a result of the transformation of audiences into markets, and as an effect of the concentration of media ownership and intensification of competition with the proliferation of new television channels (not to mention the need this creates for low-cost news).

At other times, he talks like an essentialist, reducing the relationship to the technological imperatives of electronic media that now dominate the representational frames of news. Electronic technology not only allows but also “stresses visuals over aural information, impact and emotion over referentially derived information” (p. 107). This kind of essentialist reasoning is questionable in a number of ways. The news media usually arrive at the scene of disruptive or troubling events after they have happened. The visuals are typically routine and mundane—talking heads and cutaway shots of an event scene empty of events—that lack much intrinsic sense of drama or emotion. The drama and excitement that are staples of the entertainment format are constructed to a large extent through the spoken text—the voice-over, interview clips, and reporter commentary—that stitch the visuals together. Television and radio are *audio*-visual media and the audio relies heavily on the framing conventions of print. Altheide’s views about media technology and its visual imperatives are drawn very much from the American experience where the marginalization of public service broadcasting has allowed commercial imperatives to determine the evolution of television and radio formats largely unchallenged.

Altheide’s approach and his focus on crime rather than other areas of risk and victimization such as environmental degradation, health, or economic uncertainty steer his analysis away from the political dimensions of fear discourse, and in this respect there is a large hole at the centre of his argument. Fear discourse has become more prevalent with the growing hegemony of New Right political ideology, and it is this rather than the media’s entertainment format that accounts for its resonance. The neo-liberal aspect of this ideology has actively promoted the weakening of the state’s willingness and capacity to meet social demands at the same time that it has strengthened the power of market forces over people’s lives. Neo-liberalism has generated new forms of insecurity, marginality and precariousness that reinforce an individualized, privatized sense of responsibility for the management of risk, and undermine the micro-solidarities that tied people to family, community, and work. At the same time, the neo-conservative side of New Right ideology has capitalized on these fears and uncertainties to promote more coercive forms of social control as the panacea for solving a whole

range of social problems. This political narrative is effectively missing from Altheide's analysis, and it suffers as a result. The media may well contribute to the creation of fear, but the message they relay is one that is determined primarily elsewhere.

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