The contemporary culture of blame and the fetishization of the modernist mentality *

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Abstract

In recent years, a culture of blame has arisen in certain economically advanced societies which rules out the unexpected mishap. Its nature is theorized with reference to Mary Douglas’ blame theory. A genealogy of the modern concept of accident shows that the conceptual distinction between the foreseeable and the unforeseeable becomes meaningful under a secular cosmology. Since contemporary society is secular, how the culture of blame is able, despite this meaningfulness, to delegitimize the unexpected is analyzed by tracing it to the modernist mentality itself. Why the culture of blame has arisen is shown by tracing its emergence to neo-liberalism’s ascendance. By showing, with reference to Garfinkel and others, why the unexpected is intrinsic to social life, and by combining the lay and Marx’s meanings of the term fetishism, it is explained why the culture of blame’s mentality constitutes a fetishization of the modernist mentality. Illustrative cases are given. The culture of blame’s implications for understanding contemporary modernity vis-à-vis Giddens’, Beck’s and Bauman’s theories are discussed. The entrenchedness of the culture of blame is examined from a discursive angle.

Keywords: culture of blame, accident, modernist mentality, modernity, individualization.

* I’m grateful to the reviewers for their constructive comments; the usual caveat applies.
'An Islamic leader warned in a Portuguese newspaper 15 months ago that a London-based group … was on the verge of a major attack’. ‘The British government yesterday rejected calls for an inquiry into whether the [7 Jul 05] bombings in London could have been prevented’ (10 & 12 Jul 05).

‘Victim’s husband wants to know why [the dive guide] didn’t prevent accident’ after a scuba diver died (20 Apr 04).

Without intending any judgment here, the above cases illustrate a particular kind of blaming prevalent today in some economically advanced societies. There is now widespread belief that all mishaps are predictable and preventable; hence if mishaps occur, someone must be blamed. As The Scotsman (2001) remarks: ‘So accustomed have we now become to the idea that there is no such thing as accident … The alter ego of this belief is the blame culture’; the British journalist Alasdair Palmer (2001) observes: ‘The culture of blame insists that accidents don’t happen’. The British Medical Journal (2001, emphasis added) states this belief thus:

‘the BMJ has decided to ban the word accident … some injury producing events may seem to be … not preventable. These include …natural disasters … however … To the extent that these events are predictable, preventive steps can be taken’.

A keyword search for ‘culture of blame OR blame culture’ on Lexis-Nexis for thirteen British national newspapers¹ from 1991-2006 shows virtually no usage until the mid-1990s. For each two-year period from 1995/96 to 2005/06, the annualized frequencies of appearance of either phrase were respectively: 30, 68, 166, 266, 257, and 235. Admittedly, these data are crude,² nonetheless, they are instructive. We argue that this kind of blaming has becoming sufficiently widespread and established as a practice to merit christening it, following lay usage, the culture of blame.

Mishap or misfortune is perhaps universal to all human societies, though how it is conceptualized (e.g. wrath of God?) and classified (e.g. accidents versus non-accidents) is subject to construction under specific circumstances. Since misfortune is undesirable, it is always potentially blamable.

In relation to tribal/religious societies, Douglas (1992) argues that misfortune is either

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² E.g. some blaming may not be of the kind analyzed here.
blamed on the victim (for sinning or taboo-breaking) or an enemy as in witchcraft, or attributed to a rival with greater magical powers. In the latter case, since ‘everyone is expected to [use magic] to promote their interests’ (p 5), there is no blaming. In the cases of (supposed) sinning/taboo-breaking and witchcraft, the victim or witch have done something reprehensible against the public good and hence are blamed; by the same token, the misfortune is ‘moralized’. Thus, moralization means the social condemnation of (supposed) wrongdoing or wrongful failing to act, with the (supposed) consequence of having entailed or entailing misfortune harmful to the public good. In this paper, moralization and its associated terms (such as moral othering) are meant in this sense. In Douglas’ view, the moralization of danger continues today, only that danger now comes in the form of risk, which constitutes ‘a new blaming system’ and today’s ‘forensic vocabulary’ equivalent to past sin or taboo.

For Douglas, moralization serves to protect valued institutions: the community in the past; the individual in contemporary Western societies. When a perceived threat of misfortune exists, blaming takes the form of moral othering. Thus, witches, as well as (in relation to AIDS) homosexuals and so on are morally othered for being danger-posing.

Table 1 shows how the culture of blame is theorized in terms of Douglas’ paradigm.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Blaming in tribal/religious societies</th>
<th>Douglas’ contemporary blaming</th>
<th>The culture of blame</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reasons for blaming</strong></td>
<td>Douglas focuses on death and illness</td>
<td>Death, illness and injury</td>
<td>All kinds of misfortune from bad weather to rail service breakdown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intended subject of protection</strong></td>
<td>The community</td>
<td>The individual</td>
<td>The citizenry; rights of the individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Human agency</strong></td>
<td>Sinning/taboo-breaking; witchcraft</td>
<td>Failing to reduce risk</td>
<td>Failing to predict and prevent misfortune</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moral othering of danger-posing specific groups</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Possibility of civil servants being constituted into one such group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blame targets</strong></td>
<td>Sinners/taboo-breakers; morally-othered groups</td>
<td>Individuals failing to reduce risk; morally-othered groups</td>
<td>Individuals in positions of some form of public responsibility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Firstly, human agency (acting or failing to act), actual or alleged (as in witchcraft), is

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3 By ‘danger’, Douglas refers to both misfortune already occurred and the threat of misfortune.
central, since it involves the issue of predicting-preventing. Unlike homosexuals or lepers, but rather like sinners, blame targets do not constitute a well-defined group, for they include all kinds of individuals in positions of some form of public responsibility, such as civil servants, teachers, event organizers, and so on.

The blaming is cast in the name of the values, entirely laudable in themselves, of public accountability (as in the 7 Jul 05 case) and the protection of rights (the above scuba diver had the right to due care from the dive guide); hence both the community (the citizenry), and the individual (her rights) are meant to be protected.

Given the heterogeneity of the blame targets, and that blaming happens *ex post facto*, they generally do not constitute a specific danger-posing group susceptible to moral othering. However, where I live, civil servants have in recent years, to a small but noticeable degree, been morally othered for being well-paid but inefficient, non-caring and bureaucratic, and are perceived as posing a double danger: draining on society’s resources and subverting the value of public accountability.

It should be noted that in the culture of blame, the blamer’s personal interests need not be involved. Thus, in August 2002, a holidaying family, which had no interests at stake, blamed the government for ‘killing’ a whale washed ashore because it allegedly ‘bungled’ the rescue (see Section 6). Hence, the culture of blame should not be conflated with what has been called the culture of victimization (Taylor 1991; Furedi 2002). Similarly, while blaming sometimes also involves complaining, many complaints do not concern the culture of blame, as in simple complaints about poor public service. In this paper, victimization or complaining *per se* is peripheral.

It seems a matter of common sense that unexpected mishaps do occur. If so, how is it possible for the culture of blame to rule them out altogether? Or is this common sense fallacious? To address these questions, we have to begin with an interrogation of the concept of the unexpected mishap. This is done in Section 1, where it is shown that the conceptual distinction between foreseeable and unforeseeable events, previously non-existent, becomes meaningful under a secular cosmology. Since contemporary society is secular, how then is it possible for the culture of blame to delegitimize this conceptual distinction? This is addressed in Sections 2 and 3, where, through examining the modernist mentality in terms of Weber’s formal, instrumental rationality, it is argued that this mentality has the potential of developing into a belief

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4 For instance, in several cases of hygiene officers enforcing laws against illegal street vending in which fleeing vendors unfortunately suffered injury or death in one case, bystanders were reported as accusing the officers of being ‘cold-blooded’.
in absolute predictability-preventability.

If the modernist mentality carries such a potential, then why has the culture of blame arisen only since the mid-1990s? Sections 4 and 5 provide a genealogical analysis, showing that the culture of blame actually has a historical precedent: what has been called the liability revolution-litigation explosion in America, which predicted the culture of blame in many respects. Hence, we examine this revolution-explosion as it is instrumental to an understanding of the culture of blame which represents a replication of it on the level of the public sphere. It will be seen that just as the revolution-explosion began in the 1960s in a conducive socio-political environment, the culture of blame has arisen in the conducive ascendance of neo-liberalism.

Section 6 describes some illustrative cases. Section 7 provides a conceptual justification for arguing that the culture of blame constitutes the fetishization of the modernist mentality, by first showing, with reference to Garfinkel and others, why the unpredictable-unpreventable is intrinsic to social life, and then with reference to the meaning of the word ‘fetishism’ in both its lay and Marx’s senses.

The culture of blame has significant implications for understanding contemporary modernity. Blaming premised on the ruling out of the unexpected involves the shifting of responsibility to other persons, which poses questions for the theories concerning/of modernity of Giddens, Bauman, and Beck. Section 8 examines this issue. Despite the increasing public attention paid to the culture of blame, the mentalistic disposition which rules out the accidental underpinning it has become deeply entrenched. The concluding Section 9 examines why this is so from a discursive angle.

Finally, it should be mentioned that this paper’s focus is theoretical, individual cases are cited mainly as illustrations. Unless stated otherwise, cases cited are from this author’s place of abode (Hong Kong).

1. The concept of the unpredictable/unexpected mishap

The common-sense-contradicting ruling out of the unexpected by the culture of blame necessitates an interrogation of the concept of the unexpected itself as a first step of our analysis.

Mishap is a broad category that includes (unfortunate) accident. Thus, catching cold is
a mishap but hardly constitutes an accident, whereas twisting an ankle in a ball game is an accident and hence a mishap. There is no study of mishap as such, but since both concepts revolve round the issue of predictability/expectedness, an examination of accident should serve our purpose.

The Webster dictionary defines accident as ‘an event or condition occurring by chance or arising from unknown or remote causes’; ‘a usually sudden event or change occurring without intent or volition through carelessness, unawareness, ignorance, or a combination of causes and producing an unfortunate result’ such as a traffic accident; ‘an unforeseen unplanned event or condition’; ‘an unexpected happening…’ (all emphasis added). Hence, accident implies one or more of the following: chance, the unknown (both implying the unpredictable, at least for individual events in relation to chance), the unwilled, the unforeseen, and the unexpected.

According to Green (1997), this modern concept of accident did not exist before the 17th century. In Britain the word ‘accident’ then simply meant an incident or event. The modern connotations of the unforeseen etc. were absent because under the supernatural cosmology, all occurrences were (at least ultimately) ‘caused’ by God’s intervention, hence distinguishing between foreseen and unforeseen incidents was meaningless. Similarly, the modern concept of accident is absent in tribal societies.

During the 17th century, the secular cosmology gradually took over. In the 1660s, J. Graunt scrutinized London’s mortalities in terms of different causes of death and their patterns, drawing a distinction between deaths arising from causes which displayed regular patterns, and those from causes (such as falling from scaffolds) which did not. Statistically, the former categories of deaths were amenable to systematic examination, whereas the latter category was not. In this way the modern connotations of accident arose, for something that displayed no regular patterns could neither be predicted nor foreseen. Since then until now, accident has remained as a separate category in the healthcare field (the British Medical Journal’s above-cited editorial decision notwithstanding), distinct from non-accident categories in which death results from an identified epidemiological cause.

In relation to blaming, Green examines coroner determinations. Only when motivation (as in murder or suicide), carelessness, unawareness or ignorance (cf. above definition of accident) are ruled out, will the verdict of accidental death be

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5 Green speaks of rationalist cosmology (in the sense of scientific rationality) instead. We employ the term rationality with reference to its Weberian sense. Where scientific rationality is meant it will be referred to as such.
returned. Green describes deliberation as a ‘moral interrogation of the facts’ (p 88) –
for instance, finding a doctor being neither careless nor negligent thereby morally
exonerates her.

2. The modernist mentality and rationality

As contemporary society remains secular, the foreseeable-unforeseeable distinction
should remain meaningful; if so, how is it possible for the culture of blame to
delegitimize the concept of the unexpected? We address this by examining the
modernist mentality and (in Section 3) its relation to the concept of the unexpected.

Weber and Bauman understand modernity first and foremost in terms of a state of
mind. Weber examines the modernist mentality in terms of rationality. For him,
rationality refers to a drive to consistency, coherence and rigour (Whimster and Lash
1987); it is present in all religions; but Calvinist rationality happened to entail the rise
of a specifically modern form of secular rationality, namely, formal, instrumental
rationality. Instrumentally rational action constitutes a means to attain set ends;
whereas formal rationality refers to the use of rules, procedures, and, where possible,
‘quantitative calculation’, as being the most efficient instrumental means. Related to
formal, instrumental rationality are the concepts of disenchantment and
intellectualization, both of which refer to the belief that humanity ‘can, in principle,

Bauman (1992: xi, xv, 178) sees the modernist mentality as being characterized by ‘an
incessant drive to eliminate the haphazard’ and ‘the unaccounted for’, and ‘to replace
spontaneity … by an order drawn by reason and constructed through legislative
[meaning by means of human intervention] and controlling effort’, leaving ‘no
unattended sites … to chance’. This ‘urge gestated (…) what has become a
specifically modern state: … a gardening [meaning social engineering] state’. Thus,
uncertainty and indeterminacy are mortal enemies of the modernist mentality.

3. The modernist mentality and the unpredictable-unpreventable mishap

Believing in attaining world mastery by means of formal, instrumental rationality, the
modernist mentality, as Bauman shows, potentially assumes that all problems,
including mishap prevention, are solvable. To prevent requires prediction of what
might occur. Thus the belief in absolute preventability simultaneously implies the
belief in absolute predictability. We call this double belief predictability-preventability
fetishism. Why it is regarded as fetishistic will be explained in Section 7. It should be noted that the fetishization of the modernist mentality into this double belief is, as noted, only a potential possibility. As will be shown, a conducive socio-political environment was required for this potential to materialize into the culture of blame.

Recall that accident implies chance, the unknown, the unwilled (carelessness, unawareness, ignorance), the unforeseen, and the unexpected. Clearly, chance, the unknown, unawareness, ignorance, the unforeseen, and the unexpected are all rejected by predictability-preventability fetishism. Carelessness is a form of human error, which implies the modernist mentality’s mortal enemies of indeterminacy and uncertainty. As will be shown, with one exception, all forms of human error including carelessness are also ruled out.

The concept of risk further illustrates the above. Over the centuries, risk has chronologically been associated with gambling, maritime adventures, and life and industrial accident insurance (Douglas 1992; Lupton 1999). Throughout, up until the late 1960s, it was conceptualized as a way to calculate the unpredictable, which ‘continue[s] to be considered as preordained (fate)’ (Beck 1999: 140).

However, in recent years, the concept has become infused with ‘human responsibility and [the assumption] that “something can be done” to prevent misfortune’ (Lupton 1999: 3) In consequence, the previous calculation of the unpredictable has metamorphosed into the managing of the preventable, as evidenced in the rise of risk profiling, in which risk is dissociated from the concrete individual and reified into freely-floating risk factors. Risk profiling is supposed to be able to predict, in the sense of identifying beforehand the potential criminal, terrorist, or what not, who can be ‘neutralized’ before they act, thereby preventing harm from occurring. As Castel (1991: 289) observes: ‘The modern ideologies of prevention are overarched by a grandiose technocratic rationalizing dream of absolute control of the accidental’.

It is important to note what formal rationality is meant to replace, namely, individual discretion and judgment, which are seen as indeterminate and uncertain, hence leaving room for human error. Formalized methods will enable complete elimination of human error and deliver what the modernist mentality craves for, namely, certainty in the attainment of set ends. As Bauman (1992: 129) puts it: ‘The raison d’etre of the legislative project was the possibility of a method – … that guarantees the validity of

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6 Certainly, the mythologizing of risk management has much to do with Weberian professionalizing tactics and Foucauldian power-knowledge strategy, but without the modernist mentality’s hold on public consciousness, they are unlikely to succeed so well.
the result by the sheer fact that it has been scrupulously followed’. We adopt the term method (singular or plural according to the context) as a category that includes the laying down of rules, procedures and guidelines; the making of plans; the setting up of systems; and so on. In other words, method is formal, instrumental rationality materialized, intended to replace individual discretion and judgment.

Thus, all mishaps are seen as preventable because with complete predictability, foolproof methods can be devised beforehand, which if scrupulously adhered to will guarantee prevention. We call this belief that foolproof methods can be devised beforehand methodization fetishism. Again, why it is regarded as fetishistic will be explained in Section 7. Predictability-preventability and methodization fetishisms\(^7\) frequently go together, though in different contexts the focus may be on either one instead of the two in conjunction.

But unpredicted/unexpected mishaps do occur. How come? This can only be due to either or both of two reasons: because the foolproof method has not been devised beforehand; or if it has been, because of negligence, i.e. not adhering to it. Negligence in this sense is the only form of human error not being ruled out. All other forms of human error are illegitimate, since method has replaced individual judgment and discretion. An injection mix-up that claimed the life of a patient in mid-2007 illustrates this. An investigation panel chaired by a Canadian professor of medical oncology was established. Attributing the mix-up partly to error on the part of the doctor involved, the professor concluded: ‘The real task is to try to create a system [i.e. method] such that human error is not possible’ (South China Morning Post, 29 Jul 07). Hence, mishaps are blamed either on the individual(s) who should supposedly have devised the foolproof method beforehand, or on the individual(s) who has/have been negligent in this sense.

If the modernist mentality implies the potential to rule out the unexpected, why has the culture of blame arisen only since the mid-1990s and not previously? An investigation into this shows that the culture of blame actually has a historical precedent, namely, what have been called the liability revolution in tort law and the resultant litigation explosion in America. This revolution-explosion predicted the culture of blame in many respects; hence examining it (Section 4) is instrumental for understanding the culture of blame’s historical genesis (Section 5).

\(^7\) These two fetishisms should not be conflated with Weber’s irrationalities of rationality.
4. The American litigation explosion: first incarnation of blaming underpinned by predictability-preventability fetishism

Before the 1960s, tort law, revering supposedly freely-arrived at contracts, largely protected the rich and powerful. Thus, in 1937, a drug company developed a solvent to go with the drug sulfanilamide with less than two months of research and without testing on animals. The solvent killed 100 people, but the company largely escaped from liability under the principle of *caveat emptor* (Huber 1990: 23-4). In the 1960s, legal reformers worked on redressing the balance, while activists such as Ralph Nader campaigned to defend consumers’ rights. In 1962, the California Supreme Court ruled against contract and declared for strict liability, whereupon what Huber calls the liability revolution began to unfold.

These undoubtedly progressive developments have unfortunately produced unintended consequences, because of ‘the self-interest of practitioners’ (Huber 1990: 223). Since the late 1960s, ambulance-chasing lawyers have sparked America’s litigation explosion (Olson 1992; see also Howard 2001).

It was this that made Douglas look into contemporary blaming (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). As Douglas (1992: 15-6) remarks: we now ‘treat every … accident as caused by someone’s criminal negligence, every sickness a threatened prosecution. Whose fault? is the first question. Then … what compensation?’.

Let’s examine this liability revolution-litigation explosion with reference to blaming and the modernist mentality. The liability revolution enabled the moralization of mishaps to resort to the court. Obviously, a plaintiff must claim that the mishap is (at least partly) preventable (by the defendant). Now, all events are preceded by an antecedent sequence of events. Thus, beginning with a mishap and working back retrospectively, it will invariably seem that at various points in the antecedent sequence, if something did or did not occur, or was or was not done, the subsequent course of events would have been different, and hence the mishap would not have happened. Of course, this merely constitutes *ex post facto* wisdom, which *always* makes it appear that the mishap could have been prevented. But as Section 7 will show, it does not stand to reason to expect, while events are unfolding, humans to be able to *always* do or refrain from doing what *ex post facto* wisdom tells them *after the fact* should have been done or not done.

Perrow’s (1984) study of accidents also shows why *ex post facto* wisdom is
misleadingly alluring. In complex systems, the different combinations of interacting parts, each of which could possibly go wrong, are so numerous that it is simply practically impossible to prepare for all eventualities. Thus, accidents are bound to happen some time. In accident reconstruction, the cause is often found to be trivial, i.e. a simple eventuality that has not been prepared for. But believing in the omnipotence of human rationality, the modernist mentality would insist such a triviality to be foreseeable.

In the 1960s-1970s, American courts adjudicated in a socio-political environment in which public sentiment had swung towards protecting the little woman in the street against big corporations. This undoubtedly facilitated the rule of *ex post facto* wisdom in courtrooms: ‘[the] new tort theories assumed that most accidents could be foreseen and prevented’ (Huber 1990: 74).

Reflecting on this, Douglas and Wildavsky (1982: 32) refer to Levi-Bruhl’s contrast between moderns possessing scientific rationality and pre-moderns who ‘demand [a moralistic] autopsy for every death; the day we do that, the essential difference between our mentality and theirs will be abolished’. A decade later, Douglas (1992: 9) asks why blaming is still possible if moderns possess scientific rationality and are capable of ascertaining real cause (of death). What she means is that it is because pre-moderns lack knowledge of real cause of misfortune that room exists for them to moralize misfortune; whereas such room should have vanished for moderns. She attributes the continuation of blaming among moderns to the existence of knowledge gaps, meaning that due to these gaps, real cause remains not perfectly ascertainable, hence room still exists for misfortune to be moralized. From our perspective, if *ex post facto* wisdom is able to pinpoint what should have been done or not done, it by the same token shows that there is in fact no (after-the-fact) knowledge gap (as inadequacy of scientific rationality). Thus, what makes blaming possible is rather the modernist mentality developing into predictability-preventability fetishism.

The American litigation explosion is the first incarnation of blaming underpinned by the modernist mentality developing into predictability-preventability fetishism facilitated by a favourable socio-political environment. As some of its developments provide exact parallels to the culture of blame, they are worth mentioning.

One common way to claim compensation is to argue design defect. Of course, genuine design defects exist (as in the 1937 case cited above). However, even honest designs based upon the latest knowledge and fully satisfying government regulations
routinely face claims.

Under the previous principle of contributory negligence, if a man jumps onto the rail track moments before an oncoming train arrives and gets injured, no compensation claim could be made. Since the late 1960s, comparative negligence has taken over, according to which the partial responsibilities of the different parties involved are assessed. Whereas this move was in itself progressive, ambulance-chasing lawyers soon made use of comparative negligence to make claims, for instance, for the just-mentioned man who jumped onto the rail track, arguing that the driver should have been able to stop in time (Huber 1990: 78).

Design defect and comparative negligence constitute a potent combination. A product can be sued for design defect simply because of all eventualities, it can be claimed after the fact that the design is defective because it has failed to protect against acts of the particular kind which has occurred, and hence the manufacturer is partially liable. In 1987, a psychopath placed cyanide in a bottle of Tylenol capsules, the manufacturer was sued on the claim that the bottle's design was defective because it failed to predict-prevent against sabotage of this particular kind (Huber 1990: 40).

Another way to sue is to argue lack of warning. Manufacturers should, of course, warn consumers against obvious risks involved in the product’s use of which consumers may not be aware. However, cases soon emerged that every scenario against which no warning is issued can provide ground to sue. In 1979, a peanut butter manufacturer was sued because a mother who choked her baby with too thick a spread claimed she was not warned against that in particular (Huber 1990: 55).

The cases cited above would probably bewilder many people, but they are not rare; Huber (1990) and others cite a great number of similar cases. Actually, our daily life is numerous inscribed by the effects of legal reasoning pushed to the extreme by predictability-preventability fetishism. For instance, where I live, to guard against potential claims, public beaches broadcast baffling announcements such as ‘If you are not a good swimmer, do not swim in deep water’; ‘All across America, playgrounds are being closed or stripped of standard equipment’ in the 1990s (Howard 2001: 3); and so on.

5. Genealogy of the culture of blame

In Chart 1, the genealogy of the culture of blame is shown graphically, in which the
The rise of the rights discourse fed into the liability revolution, which provided the basis for the litigation explosion. The loop back from the explosion to the revolution shows that the latter continued to unfold (in the form of court deliberations) in the process of the former. The ‘Underpinning mentalistic condition…’ box is placed at the
top. It feeds into various other boxes, including that of the liability revolution (the new tort theory’s foreseeability-preventability assumption) and the litigation explosion (that assumption underlying court judgments). These relations are verbally explained only and not shown graphically to avoid overly-congesting the chart. The socio-political environment was conducive to this, hence the arrow from the ‘Rise of the rights discourse…’ box (as a proxy for that environment) to the ‘American litigation…’ box. This latter box is vertically elongated because the litigation explosion is still ongoing.

The culture of blame’s genesis can likewise be traced to a change in the socio-political environment, namely, neo-liberalism’s ascendance. Building upon the Thatcherite-Reaganite slogan of ‘government is the problem’, Britain launched its public-service-as-customer-service campaign with John Major’s Citizens’ Charter in 1991. In Bryan Turner’s (2004: xviii) view, ‘the neo-liberal revolution has converted the citizen into a … member of consumer society … [the citizen becomes] somebody who complains about poor services’. Adapting from Turner, we might christen this as the consumerization of citizenship. The concept of citizenship implies both rights (political, civil and, since Marshall [1950], social) and responsibilities. In contrast, as the saying goes, consumers are always right; and they need only enjoy rights from, but bear no responsibility to, the seller or service provider. A possible consequence of transforming citizens into citizens-as-consumers is that they focus simply on their rights and ignore their responsibilities. This seems to have occurred, as the following case illustrates.

In November 2005, a public doctor prescribed one bottle of heavily-subsidized laxatives to an out-patient, declining the latter’s demand for six. Forgetting that consumers are never to be let down, the doctor became subject to a complaint investigation. The patient-as-consumer apparently saw his consumer’s right to demand as many bottles as he saw fit to be sovereign, and felt no need to bear any citizen’s social responsibility, so as not to impair the social right of others to adequate healthcare, for the prudent use of public resources.

The arrows from the ‘Rise of the rights discourse’ and ‘American litigation…’ boxes into ‘The consumerization of citizenship’ box are meant to suggest that ideas developed in the American revolution-explosion to protect consumers feed into the formation of the concept of public-service-as-customer-service, i.e. protecting the rights of citizens-as-consumers. Public accountability as an abstract principle is, of course, not new. However, it is undoubtedly neo-liberalism’s ascendance that has
transformed it into serious practice as graphically indicated. As noted in the introduction, blaming is cast partly in the name of public accountability.

Certain features of the media (Tiffen 1989; Lau 2004) have made them play an instrumental role in the culture of blame's formation in harmony with the consumerization of citizenship and the principle and practice of public accountability. First are news values such as negativity (any perceived mistake made by individuals in positions of public responsibility makes ‘good’ news), and avoidance of complex balancing of factors and preference for simple black-and-white conclusions (which promotes simplistic fault-finding). Then there are the professional mottoes of the media constituting the fourth estate and acting as guardians of the ‘public interest’. The arrows from the ‘Role played by the media’ box indicate the effects of these features.

Concerning the left-most box, it has been argued (Furedi 2002) that neo-liberalism’s triumph has produced generalized social anxiety in consequence to its labour regime, welfare cuts, and so on. The defeat of the political left and organized labour has stripped people of the collective means of response, leaving them to face this situation as atomized individuals. Under these circumstances, psychic factors carry enhanced social explanatory power. It is a well-known psychoanalytic thesis that anxiety threatens the integrity of the self and hence is repressed; but what is repressed does not vanish; one mode of defence is to displace it onto an external object, which by being in the self’s imagination susceptible to control, provides a (false) sense of being in command, thereby satisfying the psychic desire for security. It is suggested that in blaming, the blame targets are psychically held responsible for the repressed social anxiety. Since they cannot avoid having to stand in the dock of public scrutiny, at which they often have to suffer abuse in silence (cf. the hygiene officers accused of being ‘cold-blooded’ mentioned in note 4), this gives a false sense of control. From this perspective, we can appreciate the psychic significance of the recurrent demand for public apology from those being blamed, for it signifies submission.

Blaming in the name of protecting rights is shown in the ‘Contemporary rights discourse’ box, which mentions ‘duty of care’. Duty of care is a legal obligation in tort law imposed on an individual to exercise due care while performing any act that could foreseeably harm others. What is meant here is a loose lay counterpart to this legal obligation, as indicated by the arrows from the ‘Liability revolution’ and

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8 Hollway and Jefferson (1997) utilize this psychoanalytic thesis to analyze the contemporary fear of crime analogously to our argument.
A typical case of duty-of-care-based blaming is the 2006 marathon. In recent years, the annual marathon has been attended by all and sundry, from participants wearing jeans to entire photo/video-taking families. On that particular occasion, the air quality was poor but within race-able range. A record number of participants required medical help. Unsurprisingly, the organizers were blamed for not taking due care of the participants by going ahead with the race. An American parallel occurred in 1978. In a cross-country motorcycle race for novices, a 16-year old participant, whose parents gave consent for his participation, was injured. He sued the organizers for failing to instruct him in racing technique and evaluate his capabilities (Huber 1990: 80).

To summarize, the culture of blame has arisen in the context of neo-liberalism’s ascendance being underpinned by the fetishization of the modernist mentality. The media also play an instrumental role. The culture of blame was predicted by the American revolution-explosion. Ideas originating from and developed in it feed into the culture of blame’s formation as background factors. In Chart 1, boxes of the immediate historical conditions of the culture of blame are shaded; the box at the top is unshaded because it is an underpinning enabling mentalistic condition; whereas the other unshaded boxes constitute background factors.

6. Some illustrative cases

Hitherto, we have been constructing a Weberian ideal-type of the culture of blame. In real life, blaming often deviates from this ideal type. Thus, in some cases, other forms of human error than negligence in the above-defined sense may be accepted as also contributory to the mishap. This should be borne in mind when applying the ideal-typical construct. This section provides several illustrative cases in addition to those cited elsewhere in the paper.

In December 1998, a saloon car hit a highway road divider at a fork, catapulted into the air before landing, killing three and injuring two. Brake marks suggested speeding at over 200 kph, and abrupt directional change close to the fork. This constitutes a typical design defect plus comparative negligence case. Some reporters’ focus was not on the driving, but the road divider’s design, which acted as a ramp to lift the car into the air. The accident’s severity (the mishap in question) was blamed on the ‘faulty’ design. This focus and the relative disinterest in the driving were in accord with comparative negligence pushed to the limit. An exactly analogous suit was filed in
San Diego in 1984. A speeding drunk driver crossed the centre line on a curve and smashed into an oncoming car. The latter’s driver sued the city for ‘faulty road design’ (Huber 1990: 79).

Evidently, had the fork design been different, and, given the driving, a different sort of horrific scenario occurred, this other design would most probably also be found to be ‘faulty’. In other words, because ex post facto wisdom is always right, the culture of blame can always blame, whatever happens. To illustrate, whereas the December 2004 tsunami was a once-in-a-century incident, a writ was filed in the US in 2005 to sue the Thai government for failing to take necessary steps to prevent deaths. Thus, because a tsunami had occurred, the Thai government should supposedly have foreseen its destructiveness and prepared accordingly. In July 2005, an earthquake hit the Nicobar Islands off Thailand’s coast. The Thai government issued a tsunami warning. No tsunami occurred, and the Thai government was, predictably, denounced for sounding a false warning.

It might perhaps be thought that the Thai government overreacted in July 2005, since that earthquake measured only 7.0 on the Richter scale, in comparison to December 2004’s 9.15. However, in July 2006, an earthquake to the South of Java triggered a sizable tsunami, causing at least 157 dead or lost. It measured 7.2. In contrast, an earthquake measuring 8.1 in November 2006 off Hokkaido triggered waves averaging less than a foot high.

In August 2002, a baby whale was washed ashore on a remote beach in rough weather. A holidaying family called the government. Several officers and volunteer researchers arrived, and tried to push the whale back to sea, which was accomplished but only by the waves. The next morning, the whale was found floating dead off the beach.

The family blamed the government for ‘bungling’ the rescue, saying that the whale was suffering from (some unspecified) injury, and hence the rescuers should have taken it to some nursing sanctuary for treatment before towing it back to sea. A tabloid headlined: ‘The government killed the baby whale’; the ‘bungling’ accusation made the front page of an internationally leading broadsheet. The government, continued the accusation, ‘lacks procedures … there were no plans, manpower or equipment’, i.e. a pre-devised method. Had such a method existed, despite the rarity of whales in local waters, the whale would supposedly have been saved.

In September 2004, a patient died from blood transfusion, because an intern mixed up
the patient’s blood type with that of the patient in the next bed. During the transfusion, the patient showed adverse symptoms. The doctor on duty regarded them as within normality, and later a senior doctor concurred. Further transfusion took place before the mix-up was belatedly discovered.

Human error (on the intern’s part) and, possibly, judgmental errors (on the part of the doctor on duty and the senior doctor), committed either unprofessionally or in good faith, were apparently involved. Yet, in a knee-jerk fetishization of methodization, an NGO claimed that the hospital’s supervisory procedures over interns should instead be blamed. But how far and comprehensive should supervisory procedures be to attempt to absolutely rule out human error, as each and every act of all hospital medical staff could possibly have fatal consequences? And might not exhaustive double-checking entail adverse consequences of its own?

7. The fetishistic nature of the beliefs in absolute predictability-preventability and foolproof methodization

In this section, we provide a conceptual justification for characterizing the beliefs in absolute predictability-preventability and foolproof methodization as fetishistic. This is done by first showing that the unpredictable is intrinsic to social life.

Predictability-preventability fetishism assumes the ability to take every precaution, exactly as *ex post facto* wisdom would subsequently specify; whereas methodization fetishism assumes that methodization can become foolproof. There are various reasons why these assumptions are problematic; the practical reason examined by Perrow is one, a few others are highlighted below.

Alfred Schutz points out that for social life to proceed normally, humans make taken-for-granted assumptions in the ‘natural attitude’ of daily life. Harold Garfinkel conceptualizes this in terms of trust. Giddens (1991: 21, 37, 129) proposes the concept of ontological security, arguing that from infanthood onwards, humans bracket anxiety by means of developing trust in others, which provides a ‘protective cocoon’ for dealing with the social world. Lacking this trust, which is invested in day-to-day routines, life would become dread in Kierkegaard’s sense, because ‘radical doubt’ makes impossible ‘the sustaining of a viable’ normalcy, hence is ‘existentially troubling’.

Predictability-preventability fetishism rejects the necessity of ‘natural attitude’
assumptions, and demands forgoing trust by double-checking every routine. But imagine that every time after shaking hands we wipe our hands with disinfectant towel, or doctors having to double-check each other concerning everything, how long would it be before we collapse from hypertension?

Can methods become foolproof? Contrary to methodization fetishism, it is well-known that bureaucracies will stop functioning if members strictly and merely follow the laid down rules and procedures. The proverbial example is work-to-rule as a form of industrial action.

Chaos theory co-founder David Ruelle observes: ‘legislators and responsible officials should therefore face the possibility that their decisions, meant to produce a better equilibrium, will instead produce violent and unanticipated oscillations, with possibly disastrous effects’ (cited in Bauman 2000: 136). Several years ago, a horrible accident occurred on a suburban highway. This was again blamed on ‘faulty’ design. In response, the railings were modified. In August 2006, a saloon car suspected of speeding slammed into the strengthened railings, which bounced the car back onto the road, as a result of which the petrol tank burst into flames, burning the motorist alive. In 1999, an American mother was so worried about safety that she had her child wear a bicycle helmet on a playground; the child broke his neck and died because the helmet was caught in a ladder (Howard 2001: 66-7). These two incidents show, in exactly the way suggested by Ruelle’s application of chaos theory’s insights of unpredictable consequences to the social context, that rationalization can never eliminate the contingent.

At this point, it should perhaps be noted that to regard a mishap as not reasonably foreseeable naturally involves judgment. Hence, with a few exceptions (e.g. cases involving the demand for foolproof procedures), the illustrative cases cited in this paper are subject to interpretation. That is unavoidable. Notwithstanding that, given the legitimacy of the category of the unpredictable, they should serve our purpose.

We can now explain our use of the term fetishism. A fetish is an object believed to possess super-human powers. On the other hand, in Capital, Marx speaks of commodity fetishism. This means that the categories of value and commodity (constituting both sides of the same coin) are embodiments of a specific form of social relations, namely, relations between independent producers producing for market exchange. The value of each commodity depends on the average social labour time required to produce it; the quantitative relations between the values of different
commodities constitute their exchange values, which, measured against a money commodity (gold or silver), are manifested as market prices. Under different forms of social relations (such as self-sufficient producers or producers producing according to economic planning), the social labour congealed in products will not acquire the value form, hence value and its derivatives will not exist, and products will not become commodities. However, in post-classical economics and lay consciousness, value and its derivatives and commodity have become dissociated from social relations (which are now hidden from view), and reified into, so to speak, eternal natural entities endowed with intrinsic (i.e. non-socially originated) attributes. The term fetishism is used here in the dual lay and Marx’s senses. Rationality represents human effort to deal with issues and problems arising in social life, hence they have limits co-extensive with the limits of being human. Since there are various limits to being human (the need to adopt ‘natural attitude’ assumptions, etc.), perfect rationalization in the forms of absolute predictability-preventability and foolproof methodization is unattainable. The beliefs in absolute predictability-preventability and foolproof methodization, however, precisely reify formal, instrumental rationality into something dissociated from its social origins as fallible human effort, possessing intrinsic super-human (hence infallible) powers that can guarantee the attainment of absolute control of the accidental. This is why these beliefs are fetishistic in our dual sense, constituting the fetishization of the modernist mentality.

8. Understanding contemporary modernity: the culture of blame and Giddens’, Beck’s and Bauman’s theories

It is unnecessary to adopt the New-Right blame-the-victim position to see that individual responsibility is considerably diminished in the liability revolution-litigation explosion. The culture of blame is apparently producing something similar. If there are daredevils who fantasize being racing drivers, blaming ‘faulty’ design will not eliminate horrific crashes. After the 2006 marathon, organizers looked into how things might be improved. There were proposals to screen intended participants on the basis of previous experience and a medical clean bill of health, which were eventually dropped, unsurprisingly drawing criticism. The interesting point about the criticism is its implicit demand to shift the responsibility of assessing an individual’s suitability to participate from the participants to the organizers.

Nowadays, governments have to launch campaigns to remind people of the importance of regular physical exercise, balanced diet and sufficient sleep. Neo-liberalism emphasizes individual responsibility; ironically, partly as an
unintended consequence of its programme, individual responsibility has given way to blaming others.

This has implications for understanding contemporary modernity vis-à-vis the theories concerning/of contemporary modernity and the corresponding theses of reflexive individualization of Giddens (high modernity), Beck (second or reflexive modernization), and Bauman (postmodernity later christened as liquid modernity).

According to Giddens (1990: 38-43, 124-35), modernity is underpinned by ‘wholesale reflexivity’ in that ‘social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices’; it is ‘a world … where … nothing is certain … No knowledge is knowledge in the “old” sense, where “to know” is to be certain’. This certainty-rejecting reflexivity is present among the lay population generally. Further, in today’s ‘high consequence global risk’ environment, there is a generalized ‘awareness of the limits of expertise’, a generalized ‘belief that much that goes on … is outside anyone’s control’, and hence an understanding that there are ‘no “others” who could be held responsible, attacked, or blamed’. Correspondingly, self-identity has become a ‘reflexive project’, in which one’s chosen ‘modes of acting’ constitute a ‘narrative’ for which no-one else but the individual is responsible (Giddens 1991: 81).

Beck (1992: 33, 87-90, 100, 169; 1994: 12) similarly argues that in ‘risk society’ expertise is ‘followed with mistrust’, that there is ‘a general lack of responsibility’, and that there is ‘a rethinking and a new way of acting [that] accepts and affirms the ambivalence’. Correspondingly, there is a ‘social surge of individualization’ and an ‘individualization of social risks’; biography is ‘acquiring a reflexive project’ in which ‘one has to choose and change one’s social identity as well as take the risks in doing so’.

Bauman (1991: 16) rightly observes that ‘under-determination/ ambivalence/ contingency [is] a lasting human condition’. But, according to him, it is only in postmodernity that people realize this, and hence that they ‘are bound to live with contingency (aware of contingency, face to face with contingency) … Under the postmodern condition grievances … translate into self-reflexivity of the agents … the resumption by agents of moral responsibility … autonomy turns into the defining trait of postmodern agents’ (1992: xxi, 197, 202). Further, reaffirming that in liquid modernity, ‘being an individual de jure means having no one to blame for one’s own misery’, Bauman (2000: 38, 59) remarks that liquid modernity is ‘the exact opposite
Thus, Giddens, Beck, and Bauman all argue that self-responsibility is the hallmark of today’s reflexive individuals, and that there is a generalized awareness of uncertainty in social life. If, however, our analysis is correct, it is then clear that not only does the modernist mentality in Weber’s sense of formal, instrumental rationality remain considerably entrenched, it has since the mid-1990s been, so to speak, fully actualized in the form of the two fetishisms. Contrary to Giddens, Bauman and Beck, in the culture of blame, uncertainty is rejected, and individual responsibility decidedly takes a backseat. Whereas no claim is intended to cast doubt on their theories generally, it seems that at the very least, understanding contemporary modernity as being characterized by multiple and multi-directional tendencies may provide a more balanced perspective.

9. Concluding remarks: the culture of blame, discourse, and values

The British Medical Journal’s editorial decision would probably baffle many people. Be that as it may, the various kinds of knee-jerk responses to public mishaps (ritualistically alleging faulty design in road accidents, etc.) show how entrenched the ruling out of the accidental has become. We conclude this paper by briefly commenting on this entrenchedness.

The culture of blame is a practice which manifests an underpinning mentalistic disposition to rule out the accidental arising from the modernist mentality’s fetishization. Neither the practice nor the disposition is an open discourse. The practice does not proclaim itself (nobody who honestly blames thinks she is doing so because the blamed party is believed to be rightly responsible); with the BMJ’s unique exception, the disposition is unstated because unconscious. Actually, it is perfectly possible to verbally (and honestly) accept the possibility of accidents in the abstract (after all, this accords with common sense), but to dispositionally rule them out in practice in discursive silence.

Further, blaming is cast in the name of such discourses as public accountability and individuals’ right to due care which, among other factors, constitute the culture of blame’s conditions of emergence. With 1960s legal reformers and consumer advocates, and neo-liberalism having won the discursive battles concerned, these discourses are hegemonic today. Critiquing the ruling out of the accidental does not, of course,
involve any challenging of the principles represented by these discourses. For instance, an individual can be held accountable for making a human error (in the general sense, not in our above-defined narrow sense) thereby causing an accident, without the accident being seen as predictable-preventable. Or an accident might have occurred for which nobody need be held accountable and blamed.

However, scalp-claiming constitutes the visible proof of upholding public accountability; this is especially true of media practices given the media’s previously-mentioned features. On the other hand, the often bewildering outcome of the liability revolution shows that principles such as duty of care know no in-built logical limits to which they can be pushed. Douglas (1992: 30) remarks that ‘Anyone who insists that there is a high degree of uncertainty is taken to be opting out of responsibility’. Undoubtedly, claiming unpredictability-unpreventability can sometimes constitute an excuse to deny responsibility. However, given the quest for visible proof of upholding public accountability and the logical openness in which the duty-of-care principle can be pushed to peanut-butter-case-like extremes, Douglas’ point implies that any questioning of blaming and its ruling out of the accidental gets categorically disposed of as constituting a challenge to the above hegemonic discourses, without the need for either the practice or the disposition to discursively respond to the questioning, since they are respectively unproclaimed and unstated. In the light of this complex situation, the disposition’s entrenchedness becomes comprehensible.

Finally, it should be mentioned that in providing a social-theoretic analysis, this paper by the same token provides a critique of the culture of blame and its underpinning disposition. This critique is theoretical, and not moralistic (in the general sense of the term), in nature; further, it does not entail any specific value choice concerning the culture of blame. There would be no contradiction to agree with this paper’s analysis, but believe that the culture is a price worth paying in return for a vigorous public sphere. Whether or not that is true and whether or not the price is limited to the issue of the public sphere (cf. the stripping of playground equipment) are beyond our present scope. It should likewise be clear that our analysis in no way constitutes a political defence of authority against criticism or a denial of the usefulness of mishap post-mortems; what it does, as a social-theoretic thesis, is to point out that much critique and many post-mortems fall too easily into fetishism’s pitfall.

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9 As noted and worth repeating, blame targets are not limited to senior government officials, but include humble teachers, and so on.


References


