The Fort-Da of Insecurity

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Abstract:
Insecurity affects social imaginaries by tending to delimit their internal complexity and by valorising an exclusivist mode of being and relating organised in terms of the friend-enemy distinction. As the friend-enemy distinction installs itself more thoroughly into the discourse and practices of everyday life, and becomes the hegemonic categorisation through which proper and improper forms of identity, power and violence are enacted, thought and evaluated, the scope for difference and for the creative resolution of conflict is ever narrowed, or so it would seem. Taking discussions of insecurity by Robert Castel and Ulrich Beck as a starting point, this article examines what it terms the fort-da of insecurity; the recurrent process through which human subjects lean, with varying degrees of success, on instituted imaginaries to contain and order the fragility of human subjectivity. Qualitatively different social imaginaries support quite distinct modes of dealing with insecurity and defending against anxiety. Some validate the friend-enemy distinction and the repertoire of paranoid-schizoid mechanisms upon which it relies. Others may support “an art of doubt”; a mode of dealing with anxiety that tends to optimise choice, creativity, complexity of judgement, agency and ambivalence and that promotes the mutual enactment of cosmopolitan subjectivities. The dilemma is that globalisation, in its preferred self-understanding, presumes such an emergent cosmopolitanism while at the same time amplifying insecurity in ways that undercut such cosmopolitan potentialities. Beck’s wager that such circumstances also contain the potential to generate an artful doubter is examined. Psychoanalytic theory is drawn into the discussion in order to characterise and explore the ways in which different social
imaginaries work, in qualitatively distinct ways, as containers or projectors of ontological insecurity.

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Yet in these societies surrounded and traversed by forms of protection, preoccupations over security remain omnipresent. It is impossible to evade the troubling character of this fact by pretending that the sense of insecurity is only a delusion of the rich who have forgotten the price of blood and of tears, and the time when life was harsh and cruel. It bears such social and political effects that it has well and truly become a part of our reality, even playing a large role in structuring our social experience. Let us agree: though the greatest forms of violence and social decline have been to a great extent repressed, concern over security is very much a popular preoccupation, in the strongest sense of that term.

How can we make sense of this paradox? It leads to the hypothesis that it would be wrong to think of insecurity and the forms of protection as opposites, as if they belong to two contrary registers of collective experience. Modern insecurity stems not from the absence of protection, but almost from its opposite, it emerges from the unclarity of the scope of protection in a social universe that has been organized around the endless pursuit of protection and a frantic search for security. What does it mean to be protected in these conditions? It is not to be installed in the certainty of power, with absolute mastery over the risks of existence, but rather to live surrounded by systems of securitization that are complex and fragile constructions, and carry within them the risk of failing in their task and deceiving us by not living up to the expectations which their construction brought with them. The search
for protections will itself create insecurity. The reason being that the sense of insecurity is not an immediate given of human consciousness. On the contrary, it is wedded to different historical configurations, because security and insecurity are used to indicate attitudes towards types of protection that a society assures, or does not assure, in an adequate manner. In other words, today to be protected is also to be threatened. The challenge to be raised will be to better understand the specific configuration of this ambiguous relationship between protection and insecurity, or between assurances and risks, in contemporary society.

(Robert Castel, 2003)

Robert Castel’s argument quoted above nicely characterizes the contemporary relationship between the radically enhanced promise of security and the anxiety that reliance on complex and fragile systems of securitization provokes. Such insecurity is further enhanced by what Castel identifies as the lack of clarity – the unclarity – as to the scope of the protection offered by these very expert systems and technologies. Hence Castel draws the conclusion that “to be protected is also to be threatened”, it is to live in the penumbra of systems of securitization that raise expectations as to the levels of security possible while themselves being prone to failure. In such a second modernity, in Beck’s “risk society”, the expansion of hazards and mega-hazards radically multiplies the complexity of those delivery systems through which security is apparently guaranteed.

My own argument is in full agreement with the position developed by Castel in the paragraphs quoted above; but with one significant exception. The “exception” is the claim that “the sense of insecurity is not an immediate given of human consciousness”. Castel makes this argument in order to highlight how changing social conditions may
give rise to new expectations. In making the argument in this manner he overlooks, however, the dynamic relation between society and psyche, a dynamic relation that he otherwise relies upon to explain how certain target groups become the condensation point around which social anxieties are organized.

By contrast, in this paper I want to address the interconnected psychic and social dimensions of what might be termed the fort-da of insecurity; the recurrent process through which human subjects lean, with varying degrees of success, on “others” and the “Other” – that is, on instituted imaginaries - to contain and order the fragility of human subjectivity. In particular I will focus on the ways in which this fort-da game recurrently plays itself out in the contemporary West. In concordance with Castel, I will address the ways in which the conditions of late modernity have instituted new structures of securitization that amplify ontological insecurity. However, I will also pay explicit attention to the psychic and cultural consequences of such a new regime of In/Security, in recognition of the inevitable interplay between this new constellation of the risk society and the culturally encoded repertoire of psychic defences against anxiety and insecurity. Both narcissism and the narcissism of minor differences figure here, as the fragility of the subject exposed to the trials of late modernity resolves into the denials and defences of, either, presumed autonomy or assumed community; the entrepreneurial self as against the re-traditionalised self. That third figure of the cosmopolitan self struggles to find purchase within a globalising multi-culture that requires cosmopolitan habits and dispositions to realise its promised potential, but is unable to institute the social and cultural conditions that might successfully generate and establish such a cosmopolitan
imaginary as a new lingua franca. The burden that this incapacity creates is sloughed off onto the individual and the local and becomes the domain within which the spectre of insecurity takes up its haunting presence; a presence that accelerates and amplifies, whilst also weighting or biasing, the dynamism of the fort-da game and thereby restricts the potential scope of cosmopolitan creativity.

While developing this account of the novelty of the contemporary situation in a vein consistent with Castel’s main emphases, I will also draw on psychoanalytic theory to develop an argument that does recognise the primary character of ontological insecurity and the way in which culture, as so many instituted imaginaries, addresses, represses and organises such ontological insecurity. Hence, in terms of the position outlined above by Castel, my own argument is that the peculiar features of late modernity are themselves the product of an ongoing interaction between the constellation of technological, social and economic conditions, on the one hand, and their reception and re-inscription (and sometimes novel inscription) within the cultural repertoire of the prevalent social imaginary; it being understood that this legitimated repertoire is routinely, although not inevitably, drawn upon to organise psychic defences against insecurity and social anxiety.

As we know only too well, the sources of insecurity are manifold. If political terror has stalked the West’s imaginary since at least September 11, 2001 and if global warming has surfaced in the guise of the universal terrorist, whose presence is glimpsed with the flick
of every light switch, there is also a series of less dramatic, more routinised, sources. These include the insecurities of the labour market, the apparent “corrosion of character” and the hegemony of neo-liberalism as the new common-sense of public policy and everyday life. Lyotard’s early formulation of these features in *The Postmodern Condition* remains compelling. As he stated it in 1979, “the course that the evolution of society is currently taking” involves a change wherein “the temporary contract is in practice supplanting permanent institutions in the professional, emotional, sexual, cultural and international domains, as well as in political affairs” (1984: 66). More recently, Robert Castel has made a similar argument, focussing more directly on “the structure of wage society” and its “crisis” or “disintegration since the mid-1970s” and the “disaffiliation”, indeed “destitution” and “isolation” that this generates (2000). Castel regards these systemic neo-liberal changes in State and economy as doubly disaffiliating in that they involve the coincidence or meeting of two vectors; one, “the axis of integration/non-integration through work” and the second “an axis of integration/non-integration into a social and family network – in other words, involvement in (or breakdown of) a system of relationships within which they [the affected individuals] can reproduce their existence on an emotional and social level” (2000: 520). This is a novel social constellation in which a small yet increasing proportion of the population in Western societies such as France find themselves exposed to insecurity on an enhanced scale and with fewer, receding social supports. Castel has in mind “the long-term unemployed, young people looking for work and on training schemes, single adults eligible for … (guaranteed minimum income benefit), lone mothers [and] young couples crippled by the impossibility of paying bills and rent” (2000: 519). Elsewhere, Castel argues that
disadvantaged youth today, in France usually the children of post-colonial immigrants living in the banlieues, have had projected upon them a multiplicity of fears and anxieties that themselves have emerged from the condition of insecurity in late modernity (2007). Hence, while seeming to be located at the periphery, these target populations are better understood as standing at the core or centre of a series of social tensions as both signifiers and containers of insecurity. Castel rightly characterizes this as “an extraordinary condensation of the global problematique, or issue, of insecurity” (2003: 55). Here we see a vicious cycle in which everything from the threat of mega-hazards to the fear of long-term unemployment impacts on a population, in ways that spook the whole society with the spectre of insecurity while singling out the most vulnerable or exposed as the containers or condensation points around which the social imaginary is re-oriented. In turn, these same excluded youths and others frequently react with rage to their disaffiliation and their being scapegoated as containers or condensation points for a global sense of insecurity: “[b]eneath these experiences runs a rage … which, when it fails to crystallize into a plan to transform things, explodes into sporadic, gratuitous violence” (Castel, 2000: 531).

In sum, then, it is the very conditions of late or post modernity and a globalising world that generate insecurities on an enhanced scale. Trust, which operates as a kind of antidote to insecurity, is itself in decline – or so we are told – and that is one of the few stories that we still seem to trust! The survey research indicates as much, of course. More generally, as Marx told us long ago “All that is solid melts into air”. So, this is hardly news. However, the theorists of the risk society do have a point when they suggest that
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the process of disembedding individuals from tradition and convention has speeded up radically in the past fifty-odd years. However, they are less alert to the fact that group particularisms have also increased in scope over the same period. These two tendencies - disembedding and re-embedding - play themselves out as parallel processes that compete to recruit subjects to one or another kind of fort-da game, one or another instituted imaginary, each addressing in its particular manner the recursive and dynamic oscillation between ontological security and insecurity, as the individualisation process leaves individuals apparently free, but actually obliged, to choose. Or else, to turn to a faith or ideology, or an addiction, that settles or routinises the issue of choice.

The fort-da is, of course, an account by Freud of his grandson’s play with symbolisation as a defence against insecurity (1961: 12-17). By extension, we can discern a parallel process in the routines of everyday life – they too present instituted ways of dealing with insecurity and anxiety. Certain very significant implications follow. The particular qualitative features of each instituted imaginary (each particular, elaborated and reiterated fort-da game) become of paramount significance as the scope and support for agency, creativity and capacities for the handling of complexity and ambivalence are over-determined by the specific features of the instituted imaginary that is relied upon to organise subjectivity and intersubjectivity at any particular moment. The practices and mentalities that count as proper modes of being and relating to self and others and to processes of power, authority and violence are signature themes in this regard. For instance, when the friend-enemy distinction has installed itself as the predominant or hegemonic common-sense with regard to certain social groups and problems, such an
instituted imaginary eliminates choice, creativity and the capacity to make complex
distinctions, constrains agency and outlaws ambivalence. Qualitatively distinct social
imaginaries that more fully optimise choice, creativity, complexity of judgement, agency
and ambivalence can provide much stronger support for the mutual enactment of
cosmopolitan subjectivities and for the negotiations that such trials of subjectivity
typically involve. However, if globalisation, in its preferred self-understanding, presumes
such an emergent cosmopolitanism while at the same time amplifying insecurity in ways
that undercut such cosmopolitan potentialities, then the fragility of subjectivity caught
within such a disembedding and disruptive process, along with the instituted imaginaries
through which identities for the moment are formed and defended, both become of
paramount significance.

Ironically, as Castel notes, the promise of security seems to breed more and more
insecurity. For instance, instead of generating an enhanced sense of security the
increasing reliance on expert systems has generated its opposite. Beck (2004: 101) makes
a wager at this point. In the terms we are using, he proposes that increasing risk and
insecurity themselves provide the conditions that reflexively generate a new mode of
being in the world – a mode that involves our being creatively at work within the paradox
of an “individualising structure” that is “non-linear, open-ended, ambivalent and
continuous” (1997). In “The Art of Doubt” Beck (1999) celebrates his thought-child, the
risk society subject, as a reflexive, rather than linear, doubter. This type of human subject
is adept at evaluating complex, uncertain and competing forms of expertise and displays
an aptitude for creative ambivalence with which to make decisions in the face of uncertainty and to act effectively while on an insecure footing. As Beck puts it:

This all-encompassing and all-permeating insecurity is not just the dark side of freedom…. The introduction of insecurity into our thought and deeds may help to achieve the reduction of objectives, slowness, revisability and ability to learn, the care, consideration, tolerance and irony that are necessary for the change to a new modernity. (168)

Now, I like to think that the art of reflexive doubt, as a predominant mode of being and relating in the world, is a possibility, but I do not think it can emerge as a sub-political reflex to the challenges of a world risk society and the individualised human subject. There is nothing guaranteed or autonomic about its emergence. Rather, if achieved it will be achieved for the moment - that is it will always be at risk of being eclipsed again. Moreover, it will be achieved through conflict with those other techniques and mentalities that compete to install the friend/enemy distinction as the sole and proper reality principle.

The friend-enemy distinction, Schmitt’s distinguishing criterion of the political, can itself be eclipsed or else it can be sublimated, but it cannot be eradicated. Schmitt notes as much when he comments that “it is a political entity when it possesses, even if only negatively, the capacity of promoting that decisive step, when it is in the position of forbidding its members to participate in wars, i.e., of decisively denying the enemy quality of a certain adversary” (1999:37). Such a “denial” or displacement is routinely achieved, but it is never total and complete. Some friend-enemy imaginaries remain and can always extend their scope so as to achieve predominance in the organisation of what
counts as proper. Such exclusivist, friend-enemy mentalities and practices offer an answer to the anxieties of insecurity – typically through ideologies of exclusion, hatred, contempt and, often, dehumanisation that elevate the narcissism of minor, or major, differences into gross distinctions between the proper and the improper, us and them. But, of course, this answer never quite succeeds in stilling the spectre of insecurity that lies both the other side of the exclusivist boundary and that also polices the home territory, searching out and punishing those who stray from the requisite forms of ideology and identity. Rather, such exclusivist mentalities and practices rely on, and hence reiterate, the spectre of insecurity as the very rationale for their enclosure and exclusion of otherness. They construct mere difference and multiplicity as singular hostility and aggressivity and this, in turn, can become a self-fulfilling process that generates mutual antagonism of the exclusivist kind. Once installed and identified with, such social imaginaries and the practices and mentalities they support and legitimate are extremely difficult to displace. Effective change involves an ideological re-ordering through bringing into predominance those contrary forms of ideology and identity that construe or enact the political through a refusal of the friend-enemy distinction. Instead, these contrary forms turn to the figure of the adversary as the organising master signifier for a politics of creative ambivalence. However, the very conditions of late modernity, nicely summarised in Castel’s aphorism that “to be protected is also to be threatened”, create circumstances in which these competing, more reflexive and ambivalent social imaginaries are typically trumped by those imaginaries that encode friend-enemy distinctions and the repertoire of psychic operations, involving splitting and projection, on which they rely. Hence, “the extraordinary condensation of the global issue of
insecurity” upon which Castel remarks. This observation recognises, at least implicitly, the manner in which the dominant instituted imaginary, as container of sanctioned modes of “othering”, organises psychic defences against insecurity and anxiety.

To see why the friend-enemy distinction is so pervasive, if not inevitably predominant, let’s start where we all started - as helpless infants. Freud (1961) emphasised the helplessness and dependency of the human infant – we are born into insecurity and that state leaves a trace that is inscribed within all identities we may come to take on and identify with for the moment. Thereby, this trace of insecurity installs itself within social imaginaries where it is instituted as a series of dichotomising distinctions that include, tellingly, the friend-enemy distinction.

There have been subsequent correctives to Freud’s emphasis on the infant’s helplessness – as in the work of Daniel Stern in his *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (1985) and, more recently, *The Motherhood Constellation* (1995) – and more broadly with researchers in the field of infant observation. A standard technique involves the videotaping of mother-infant interactions and then micro-analysis of the interaction, frame by frame. Such studies reveal the resourcefulness of the human infant as he or she smiles, gurgles and gazes her way into a playful, soothing, or nurturing interaction with the mother or caring other. The infant is not as helpless as Freud presumed. Daniel Stern’s work highlights how most infants are pre-disposed to engage the mother’s or caring other’s attention; how the infant can, typically, seduce the mother into play, engagement and jubilation. But, this is always something of a high-wire act, so to speak; it entails a
certain dicing with death. The mother may turn away for any number of reasons – periodically we learn of tragic instances of abandonment or the killing of infants by one or both parents. These are extreme cases, but they highlight the ultimate, prolonged dependency of the human infant. More typically the mother or caring other just goes to answer the phone, or sleep with her (or his) partner, or to pursue whichever domestic desire happens to strike. Or she goes to work. At any of these moments the insecurity can return.⁴ Stern’s work has been an important corrective within psychoanalysis – although often overlooked. However, it complicates rather than radically transforms Freud’s main point. That one dimension of dependency and its attendant insecurity remains the critical dimension. To survive and thrive the infant is dependent on the care and nurturance of the other – typically the mother. That relation, or set of relations, becomes the bulwark that shields the infant from both death and the deathly plunge into psychic insecurity – with its attendant anxiety and the predictable defences of splitting and projection that such anxiety tends to elicit.

In its account of the depressive position Kleinian theory offers a characterization of a mode of thinking, feeling and relating that incorporates or contains ambivalence – without resort to splitting – and that generates constructions of self and other that are multifaceted and reparative. (Mitchell 1986) These psychic processes may also take on an institutional and cultural location and operate as the supports for an alternate reality principle, one that promotes reconciliation with both the stranger within and the imagined-as-other. As Castel’s discussion highlights, however, social conditions that generate the spectre of insecurity on an expanded yet indeterminate scale are likely to
displace any emergent cosmopolitanism, as they routinely rely on imaginaries that encode
the friend-enemy distinction. Beck’s wager that these very conditions may promote an art
of reflexive doubt, with its accompanying dissolution of the friend-enemy distinction,
outlines the type of subjectivity that the risk society inevitably presumes and requires if it
is to escape the “spook of regression” (Adorno: 1951: 137), a regression that returns to
the splits and absolutisms of such a friend-enemy distinction. Beck (1997: 169)
characterises the redemptive virtues of reflexive doubt as follows:

> When self-doubts chew up the arrogance, then enemies are no longer
enemies, nor are they brothers with whom one dances in festivals of
solidarity; instead, they are fellow or opposing doubters. Their interests may
be diametrically opposed. They will be seen as such, relativised, negotiated
and arranged. The simple reason for this is that, in the age of doubt, contrasts
can no longer be dogmatised into enmities that can justify a mutual killing
machine or set it in motion. … Doubt implies multiple voices, opposing
voices on all sides and in each of us. This rules out the confrontation of friend
and enemy logically (whether it does so psychologically or socially is another
matter). Conversely, thinking in categories of enemies makes sense only in
absolutist black-white thinking; it is out of the question in the generally grey
or flowing colour spectrum of thinking informed by doubt. … A thoroughly
doubtful society… strictly speaking, cannot develop or uphold any
construction of an enemy.

Castel’s argument, however, implicitly questions Beck’s odd optimism by emphasising
that the social and economic conditions that could support the consolidation of such a
social imaginary of reflexive doubt are in decline, as negative globalisation, neo-
liberalism, mega-hazards and the spectres of violent crime and terrorism proliferate.
Beck’s artful doubter is summoned to an herculean task, seemingly armed only with the
freedoms that individualisation and reflexive modernisation have delivered. My argument has been that while this hopeful potentiality might be realised, it will require more than the conjoint promise and threat of individualisation under the conditions of the risk society. Rather, it will require the successful institution of a transformed social imaginary in which the relentless reassertion of the friend-enemy distinction is both sublimated and defeated, for the moment, by the predominance of an alternate mode of being and relating that can tolerate insecurity and uncertainty without resort to splitting and projection. As soon as such a mode of reflexive doubt begins to institute itself as the proper mode of being and relating to insecurity, as soon as it begins to claim predominance within the social imaginary, it will confront the threat of annihilation. This reaction will be led by those groups and individuals whose sense of security relies on the resort to deeply embedded, and now challenged, modes of being and relating that are organised as so many paranoid-schizoid, friend-enemy distinctions. The political will re-assert itself most violently at the very moment that its eclipse is imagined.

Even individuals as exemplary as the artful doubter need supportive instituted imaginaries in order to transact their inclusivist ambivalence and build communities of resistance to the emergence or dominance of the friend-enemy formation. This highlights the strategic significance of media of intersubjectivity, from literary texts to social movements, that institute an alternate imaginary and, thereby, make it available as a competing reality-principle, one that potentially eclipses the predominance of the friend-enemy mentality. Eventually, these codes of inclusivist ambivalence that lie dormant within the resources of the social imaginary will need to establish their vital presence
within the principal media of social power – within major State institutions, including the
welfare state and its political, military and communications institutions. Then the fort-da
play of the social imaginary may be re-set as a new and proper mode of encountering
insecurity with ambivalence and doubt, but its fragility will persist. Under propitious
circumstances the artful doubter may thrive, but will continue to be haunted by the
spectre of the artful dodger and his milieu of friends and enemies.

Endnotes:

i Robert Castel L’insécurité sociale, pages 6-7 (Translation into English by Conall Cash).
First italicisation mine, second in original.

ii A classic group psychoanalytic study with this emphasis is Isabel Menzies-Lyth’s “The
functioning of social systems as a defence against anxiety”.

iii Schmitt’s position, despite his anti-psychologism, is strikingly akin to the account
Freud develops about the ineradicable character of aggressivity, the death drive, in
Civilisation and Its Discontents. See especially Part V.

iv Of course, this is the very situation that Freud’s grandson, Ernst, attempted to master
through his invention of the fort-da game. See S. Freud, Beyond The Pleasure Principle,
chapter II.

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