

Editorial

“Put Me in a Cage:” Violence, Risk, and Technologies

We live in perilous times.

In Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, public transit bus driver Irvine Fraser, 58, was stabbed to death by one of his passengers this winter. Brian Kyle Thomas, 22, born with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), bounced between 73 foster homes as a child, convicted of seven previous violent criminal offences, homeless and battling substance abuse, was charged with second-degree murder.

Only a few days earlier, the assailant in another, more gruesome murder on a bus here in southern Manitoba where I live was given his full freedom. Ten years earlier, bus passenger Will Baker (formerly Vince Li) decapitated and cannibalized fellow passenger Tim McLean. As Baker later explained to a psychiatrist, God’s voice had told him that McLean was a force of evil and was about to execute him. The verdict at Baker’s court trial was that he was not criminally responsible (NCR), and therefore he was remanded to a maximum security mental health institution.

After ten years of being a model patient while undergoing intense psychiatric treatment, taking anti-psychotic medication, and transitioning gradually to community-based living, Baker was no longer suffering from “command hallucinations linked to untreated schizophrenia.” The Canadian Criminal Code Review Board ruled that he was no longer a threat to public safety, and gave him an absolute discharge, just days before bus driver Fraser died at the hands of a different knife-wielding assailant.

Horrible incidents like these are truly tragic and terrifying, and the local public has felt every anguish and fear imaginable, seemingly threatened by psychopathic killers on one side and a criminal justice system committed to equal justice for offenders on the other. Said Nelson Giesbrecht, one of Fraser’s distraught bus driver colleagues, “Put me in a cage.” In other words, install a full enclosure for drivers with an emergency exit from the bus on the left side, because violence on public transit, especially against drivers, is actually not unusual. But doing so has been proposed for several years across North America, and bus drivers have been loath to embrace the idea, partially because it deprives them of human contact with passengers.

The larger question is, if we put bus drivers in cages, why not each individual passenger as well? To press the point to the absurd, why do we not all constantly walk around in preferably bullet-proof cages? With all due respect and sympathy for those who have suffered indescribable violence and tragedy, when does taking all measures possible to protect our

personal safety actually degrade the quality of our lives? When does the rational become irrational, or at least unreasonable?

Rates of violent crime have been falling for decades in both the U.S. and Canada, yet fear of violent crime is growing. Perhaps the most plausible explanation is George Gerbner's cultivation thesis regarding the social effects of escalating violence in both information and entertainment media. That violence is prominent in mass media is no mystery; like sex, violence sells. But the most pervasive and pernicious effect of violence in mass media is not so much the stimulation of copy-cat assaults, the catharsis of pent-up frustrations, or even the desensitization of interpersonal empathy. It is the simple, debilitating cultivation of fear. Though we by many indicators live in much less violent times, we are much more afraid. And certain cultural ideologies, political platforms, and commercial enterprises benefit from the populous living in as much fear as possible.

It is not just fear of violent harm that drives risk management, but fear of accidental harm as well. Novices training to become school bus drivers are tutored in a litany of rules and regulations intended to reduce the risk of potential accidental harm to school children. Many rules seem to have originated from some precedent where harm did occur, followed swiftly by a new, additional rule to ensure that it never happens again. There is apparently no limit to the techniques employed to reduce risk, and no forgiveness for persons or organizations who fail to employ all means imaginable.

But that, in the social theory of Ulrich Beck, is exactly what we in late modernity have become: a risk society. During our earlier industrialization era we were focused on generating wealth, distributing goods, and striving for equality. But now in late modernity we are focused on managing risk, preventing "bads," and striving for safety. Yet our advanced technologies have created as many problems as they have solved, and simply multiplied our doubts, anxieties, and vulnerabilities. Life has become extraordinarily confusing, uncertain, and fretful, physically, psychologically, and socially.

Unable to imagine another way of life, we turn back to our technologies, because we are also, in Jacques Ellul's analysis, a technological society, though his concept is better translated as a society reliant on techniques. We have advanced physical or material technologies, such as cages for bus drivers and medications for psychopaths. We also have advanced non-material social-scientific techniques, such as psychiatric therapies for schizophrenia and social policies for deviants. We are convinced that we can master our fate by using our rationality to apply our science to solve our problems through our technologies and techniques that manage our risks and allay our fears.

Ironically, that too is its own cage, the "iron cage" of rationality and rationalization first identified by Max Weber a hundred years ago as definitive of modernity. Lacking alternative "social imaginaries" outlined by Charles Taylor, we lock ourselves in and lock others out,

resigned to the vulnerability of our seemingly unavoidable late modern human condition, resentful of the high price in authentic human interaction we pay for our personal security.

And still, “stuff” happens, both the physical and non-physical kind. Sometimes we put it to good use as fertilizer, and various waste disposal industries make their livelihood from it, but most of us avoid its unpleasantnesses as much as possible, relieved when our children finally learn to dispose of their own. And bad things will continue to happen, despite all responsible efforts to limit them. It is unreasonable to think otherwise, and a futile degradation of abundant life to devote ourselves to eradicating them entirely.

Put me in a cage? At the risk of sounding insensitive, I would rather live free, love my neighbor, trust in the providence of God, and learn to be content with whatever may befall me (Phil. 4:11). “In God I trust; I am not afraid. What can a mere mortal do to me?” (Psa. 56:11).

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