

Threat Induced Social Action

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1 Introductionⁱ

After an era in which Western societies were mainly concerned with increasing and redistributing wealth, they have shifted their priorities to the quest for safety and risk reduction. The agendas of supranational, national, corporative, collective, and individual protagonists are driven by the awareness that the achievements of civilization and the welfare state – social positions, and other prized possessions – are under threat and that these threats can and must be controlled. The aim of this article is to develop a *general model of threat-induced social action* (TISA) that can be used to study and analyse such actions. The model is a combination of approaches from different disciplines that focus on the study of threats; it employs a joint framework within which threats are modelled and approaches and empirical results are correlated with one another. The model explains actions in terms of the *social construction conditions* of threats. Threats are observed by actors who are under social influence. Their actions, in turn, influence other actors. Therefore this model supplies insights for innovative empirical research and threat *theories* that transcend the bounds of the discipline of sociology. TISA itself is not a *theory*. Rather, it is a systematic and uniform means of identifying all the elements that are needed to formulate theories and hypotheses. We will begin by explaining the concept of threat and its relationship to cognate concepts. Subsequently, we will discuss the areas of risk research, the sociology of social problems, moral panic research, and psychological stress theory that are integrated into TISA. We will

gradually combine the elements to form a complete threat model. In our conclusion, we will identify points of contact with current research trends. We will also offer suggestions for the use of the model in empirical social research.

If the notion of *threat* is to be added to existing concepts such as *danger*, *risk*, *stressor*, or *fear*, good reasons need to be provided for doing so. To begin with, threat implies *perceived imminent harm to a valued good*. We will define this idea more closely later on. What is the relationship between threat and fear? The definition in terms of the ‘expectation of negative outcome’ (Barbalet, 1998) used in fear research (Furedi, 2006; Altheide, 2006; Glassner, 2006) corresponds to our concept of threat. To date, however, it is not clear how fear – apart from the psychological/physiological component – arises in a social and cultural context or what its consequences are (Tudor 2003: 239). Fear is one *possible* response of a subject who perceives something as a threat to themselves. Thus threat is the *cause* of fear. However, fear is only one of several possible consequences of threat. Others include *challenge*, *anger*, and *routine reactions*.

Are concepts such as *risk* and *danger* insufficient to cover all conceivable threatening phenomena? Risk is defined in terms of a probabilistic statement about the likelihood of a specific event. Neither the assessment of this event as negative or positive nor the evaluation of the statement of probability is contained within the concept of risk as such. This statement may appear trivial, but it becomes significant when one examines social actions in terms of risk, as such

actions are affected by the way in which probabilities or outcomes are evaluated. Threat is reserved for events that are evaluated negatively.

The concepts of danger and risk are often used as synonyms (Douglas, 1992), which undermines the analytical potency of the concept of risk in particular. Nor is it helpful to distinguish between risk as arising from a *decision* and danger as being rooted in the *environment* (Luhmann, 2003). The concept of threat does not differentiate according to the social contingency of the negative event. It does, rather, encompass both danger and negatively evaluated risk.

Thus threat is similar to concepts that are familiar from psychological stress research, where potentially negative environmental impacts on an individual are described as *stressors*. However, environmental stimuli *per se* do not (objectively or subjectively) lead to negative consequences. In terms of the cognitive processes of *appraisal* and *coping*, it is possible to distinguish between *demands*, the consequences of which are contingent, and *stressors* in the narrower sense, which are sources of negative stress (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Our concept of threat is analogous to that of the stressor, since it presupposes the negative subjective evaluation of the environmental influence.

We use the concept of threat to focus on the frequently implied *aversive character* of certain events, processes, actions, or conditions. *Threat* implies a negative evaluation or rejection. Aversion is a constitutive characteristic of threat.

2 Current state of research

To date, publications in the field of the social sciences have not systematically focused on the genesis of threat as a communicative/interactive process. While there are case studies that deal with the social construction of threats and the actors involved (for example, Meyer, 2009; Turk, 2004), no explicit model for interpreting threats and resultant actions has been developed so far.

The field of *risk research* (for an overview see Lupton, 2007; Zinn and Taylor-Gooby, 2006) seems predestined to deal with this issue, but has not yet produced any such model, or at least has not done so within its mainstream research activities. The ubiquitous discourse about *risk society* (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990) deals with *macro-sociological* questions. Although there is awareness of this fact (Beck, 1992: 55), the social construction of the eponymous risks are dealt with only in passing (Elliot, 2002; Lupton and Tulloch, 2002: 318–19; Alexander, 1996).

Publications on risk by cultural theorists (Douglas, 1992; Lupton, 2007; Tulloch and Lupton, 2003) contain additional references to how events or situations are perceived as risks or threats and why certain threats become the subject of more intense discussion than others. In particular, they stress the social and cultural roots of the individual. Thus the processes of perception and evaluation when under threat are not free from prejudices, since they are 'already primed with culturally learned assumptions and weightings' (Douglas 1992, 58). Threats originate in collectively shared social and cultural patterns. However, even here it is impos-

sible to determine how cultural disposition is translated into specific perceptions of threat or specific actions by identifiable actors. The same is true of governmentalist approaches such as those (Ewald, 1991; Dean, 1999) that came after Foucault (2009). This approach takes the most strongly constructivist view of risk (Zinn and Taylor-Gooby, 2006) and, in particular, conceives risk as a moral technique (Ewald, 1991: 207) for exercising control and power. Little, however, is said about how the specific constructs come into being, and less attempt is made to develop an operational model suitable for generalisation.

References to threat genesis may be found in *moral panic* research (Garland, 2008; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1995). Cohen (1972: 9) defines a moral panic as ‘a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media’. The questions studied here include the ways in which deviant behaviour is construed as a threat to society. The perception of individual events gives rise to the belief in an overarching symptom, and a process of mutual reinforcement in a *spiral of signification* ensues. This is ‘a way of signifying events which also intrinsically escalates their threat’ (Hall et al., 2002 [1978], 223). Because an event or an activity is defined as a threat, each subsequent mentioning (on television or in the print media) causes its threatening nature to be perceived more strongly.

Regardless of certain important criticisms that can be directed at moral panic studies (Ungar, 2001; Rohloff and Wright, 2010), they nevertheless show how representation, staging, and reception are used

to construct threats and how the mutual reinforcement of events and threats can intensify the perceived threat. Threats, therefore, are created by social actors (Becker, 1973; Gusfield, 1963).

Most recently, Alexander et al. (2004) have presented a concept of *cultural trauma* that employs ideas taken from moral panic research and that resembles our concept of the communicative/interactive genesis of threat. ‘Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.’ (Alexander, 2004: 1). It is not the event as such that is traumatic. What is at issue is a ‘socially mediated attribution’ (Alexander, 2004: 8) which takes place during the event, ahead of the event, or after the event. Events do not necessarily have to have taken place in order to cause a potent trauma (*Thomas Theorem*). They acquire significance as the result ‘of human agency, of the successful imposition of a new system of cultural classification’ (Alexander, 2004: 10).

Our discussion of relevant theories has produced a compilation of useful approaches for understanding threats. We will now proceed to formalise the elements in order to identify their central building blocks and develop an integrative model.

3 Models

3.1 The non-relational model

The simplest idea about threat is that threats *as such* exist in the physical or social world, taking the form of people, physical objects, or events. This idea fails to recognise that it is only a specific impact on a certain object that actually causes harm.

Disaster research (Quarantelli, 1985; Dombrowsky, 1995) does justice to this fact by stressing that a disaster is not a natural event *per se*, but rather through its possible effects on human lives. Thus a thing is always a threat *for* something else. Instead of construing a specific object in the material or social world as a threat, threats should be more precisely defined as the *relationship* of one object to another.

Thus we will call one object the *source* (S) of the threat and the other its *target* (T).

3.2 The relational model: stimulus and response

Construing threat as a relation has several intrinsic advantages. In a behaviourist sense, the nexus of threat and action/behaviour now forms a stimulus-response schema. When one object (such as a lion) approaches another object (such as a gnu), the lion *becomes* a threat to the gnu. This approach to modelling is frequently found in certain scientific disciplines, and especially in technical risk research. These disciplines, too, recognise that things like viruses, road vehicles, or smoking are threats to *specific* groups. Threat relationships exist immediately in the physical or social environment, and

so represent part of a predictable reality. In simple stimulus-response models, the only question relevant to explaining action is how T responds to stimulus S and, perhaps, what the bandwidth of possible reactions is. What is important, however, is not the trivial stimulus-response mechanism, but rather the inherent *ontological* idea of the threat: The stimulus is a threat, and all the target does is respond to the threat. This idea is frequently found in *risk assessment* and *risk management*. It concentrates on the properties of the *source*, as these alone constitute the relationship. The *target* is usually not mentioned except in an indirect sense. Such ideas about threats may be relevant in certain contexts, but they are not suitable for explaining actions in social situations.

3.3 Stress theory: Stimulus-cognition response

The cognitive stress theories influenced by Lewin are based on a very different axiom. Psychology cannot understand the world in terms of its objective properties, but only in terms of the subjective perspective of the individual, and 'to substitute for that world of the individual the world of [...] anybody else is to be, not objective, but wrong' (Lewin, 1951: 62). Stress models like that of Lazarus (1993) adapt this axiom for the relationship of the individual to potentially threatening environmental stimuli, which are also termed demands or stressors. Unlike the preceding model, these concepts concentrate on *targets* and their reactions, while the *sources* receive relatively little attention. The basic idea is that the subject *may*, in a cognitive process termed an

appraisal, interpret an external, initially undefined stimulus as a threat. This interpretation, however, is not inevitable. It is the interpretation that leads to a reaction, but the interpretation is not predefined by the *source*.

The central concepts of such theories are appraisal, resources, and coping. The appraisal of the *source* by the *target* answers two questions: 1. Is it a threat, is it a challenge, or is it irrelevant (Lazarus and Launier, 1978)? 2. What resources does the *target* have for dealing with the demand (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984)? Stress then becomes a condition in which demands 'tax or exceed the adaptive resources of an individual' (Lazarus and Launier, 1978: 296). Unlike in stimulus-based concepts, the contingency of the role of the *source* is explicit. The interpretation of the threat moves from the ontic to the cognitive level. The assumption is that objective conditions may have an influence on the appraisal, but do not determine it. While in the above a threat was constituted by *properties* of the source, stress theory views threat as the result of *processes* within the target.

Stress theory and related approaches look for the individual and social resources beyond cognition that determine reactions to threats. Concepts like the *locus of control* (Rotter, 1966) and *self-efficacy* (Bandura, 1977) account for the ways in which people evaluate their own potential to affect their environmental conditions and how this affects their perception of threats. In the health sciences, the analogous concept of *general resistance resources* (*salutogenesis, sense of coherence*) has become widely accepted (Antonovsky, 1979). In the case of child development in

particular, the prevalent term is *resilience* (Rutter, 1985; Werner and Smith, 1977). The social sciences emphasise the importance of social support in stress management (Schwarzer and Leppin, 1991).

Despite certain differences, the concepts have two insights in common: Threat always includes a subjective element, and the potential harm is always qualified by the subjective vulnerability of the *target*. Threats do not occur in isolation; rather, the *target* is always embedded in a context and can draw upon resources to avert the threat.

According to Lazarus (1993), coping implies dynamic changes in the relationship to the stressor that are caused by the individual's responses. Stress theory distinguishes between behaviours on the basis of their effects. *Problem-centred coping* can influence and, under ideal conditions, eliminate the sources of stress. On the other hand, some reactions are always geared towards *emotion-centred or palliative coping*, that is, towards the mitigation of the emotional consequences. Evasion, cognitive restructuring, wishful thinking, positive comparisons, denial, and other strategies make sense when the sources of stress are not controllable. It is one of the merits of stress theory that it directs attention to the processual nature and the many different forms of coping.

3.4 Risk perception

In particular, it is the psychometric paradigm of risk research that focuses on the perception of threats (Slovic, 1987; Zinn and Taylor-Gooby, 2006: 29–32). Two instances are frequently cited here, namely

experts and lay people. The implied assumption is that experts have an experimentally and methodologically underpinned, correct perception of risks, while the perception of lay people is distorted by various individual factors. Research into this phenomenon (Rohrman and Chen, 1999; Sjöberg, 2000; Woods et al., 2008) identifies a large number of factors that result in 'faulty' perceptions. For example, researchers have studied the factors that create fear of crime and distort the subjective risk of becoming a victim of crime compared to official statistics and scientific surveys (Lupton and Tulloch, 1999). This research also examines distorting factors that refer to the source, such as the presence of minority groups (Chiricos et al., 2001).

Cultural studies of risk (Douglas, 1992; Lupton, 2007) focus on the contextual embeddedness of risk perception and question even the posited discrepancy between the supposedly objective perception of an expert and the possibly distorted subjective perception of a lay person. They adduce social and cultural contexts that influence risk perception and generate these risks as social topoi. The core conclusion is that actors not only have their own individual perceptions of threatening scenarios, but that, as actors, they also invariably 'negotiate' these threats in the course of social communication processes.

The approaches discussed so far show that a complete sociological concept of threat must take into account *both* the properties of the *source* and those of the *target*. Additionally, the role of one or more *observers* and their perceptions and interpretations is necessary in order to

produce a sufficiently explanatory threat model. When an *observer* is introduced, it is necessary to distinguish carefully between the *observer* and the *target* (see below).

3.5 Framing the situation

The introduction of the *observer* shifts the focus onto the process of perception and interpretation and plays a role in the framing model. It is helpful to evaluate threat not only in terms of analytical content, but also in terms of the social function of the term 'threat' in communicative and interactive processes. 'Threat' is a *frame* (Goffman, 1974), a culturally formed pattern of interpretation and action which actors employ on a situative basis. The pattern creates the meaning of an event. One and the same event can be framed differently by different actors. Frames encompass structuring elements: They assign specific roles to different actors, they suggest certain interactive relationships and exclude certain others. Consequently, they reduce the complexity of the action situation since they allow the actors to use the frame's specifications as aids to orientation. Accordingly, all threat frames must contain at least the *source* and *target* elements, although the two elements may not be clearly identified as such by every *observer* and are thus not distinctly represented in the frame. An *observer* may be concerned with a clearly identifiable *target* without knowing the precise *source* of the threat, and vice versa.

The frame of a threat consists of explicit information about the *source* and *target*, such as the perceived *reasons* for a *source*

to harm the *target*, or indications of social responsibility. The framing concept is also used in researching social movements. In this field, extensions such as the addition of frames for social problems were introduced (Benford and Snow, 2000). These frames may remain *diagnostic* in nature or may contain a *prognostic* component – in other words, they may articulate potential solutions and goals or even have a *motivational* effect. Frames of threat too are either confined to the simple identification of threats or may additionally suggest preventive measures and encourage action. Meyer (2009) identifies the different types of framing in American policies after 9/11. As different *observers* have their own frames, processes of frame alignment – the mutual approximation and influencing of different frames – become a subject for study (Benford and Snow, 2000). Frames do not arise *automatically* from social situations; rather, they are contingent and are negotiated in interactive processes. For example, research into social movements has shown how the framing of ecological conditions in alternative environmental groups can be modified by partial adoption of the framing of conservative farmers to develop a shared interpretation.

Here it is helpful to examine the *sociology of social problems*. As a generalisation, it is possible to interpret *social problems* as a category of threats. When *threats* are construed as *frames*, there is a connection with constructivist theories that view social problems as the products of collective definition (Blumer, 1971) driven by social groups (Spector and Kitsuse, 1973). Becker (1966) views social problems as the results of a political process in which different viewpoints are discussed and

brought into alignment with one another with the goal of motivating public action. Put another way, when an *observer* has perceived something and framed it as a threat, a discourse ensues about the validity of this frame. If the first *observer* encounters others who share his or her view, action can result without significant difficulty. In contrast, if he or she encounters divergent perceptions, both sides must begin to engage in persuasion and adaptation. In terms of the *sociology of social problems* and *movement research*, the objective is to transform the perception and interpretation of an individual group into the legitimate, acknowledged perception of society as a whole. *Advocates* and *affected persons* may, for example, try to place individual social problems onto the political and public agenda and to find support for their concerns.

In this section, we have identified source, target, observer, appraisal, coping, and framing as the building blocks of threat models. We will now turn our attention to integrating these building blocks into a generalised model.

4 A model of Threat Induced Social Action

4.1 Elements and definition of terms

Essentially, this model describes a future harmful impact of a *source* (S) on a *target* (T) that is witnessed by a social actor known as the *observer* (O). Analytically, the model distinguishes between an *object level* and an *observation level*. The impact, which takes place on the object level, is known as the *relation*. Sources of impact may take the form of social actors,

though this is not inevitable. Biological, physical, and climatic influences too may have a threatening effect, along with dictators, muggers, demons, terrorists, and economic crises. In addition to the immediate interests of social actors, such as life, health, and property, ostensibly non-social goods too may be perceived as being threatened. Unlike scientific theories, this model does not itself classify the objects of the relation, nor does it examine questions of causality or evaluate the actual harm. Rather, it reconstructs the observer's view of the relation. O may be any and every social actor who sees a causal influence in S or who believes that the impact involves harm to T. The theory does not aim to determine whether any actual harm is done, whether such harm is the result of social action, or whether its victims have any social value. The social contingency of such interpretations is of axiomatic importance.

The relationship between S, T, and O is complex in multiple respects.

1. From the perspective of O, *different interpretations of the roles of S and T are possible*. It is therefore clear that the user of the model must allow observers the freedom of their own viewpoints without judging the appropriateness of those viewpoints. Plurality of perspectives is one of the objects of the model. The model carefully distinguishes between S, T, and the nature of the harm – in other words, it recognises only *relational* threats. This is necessary because different observers may discern different sources of threat for the same target or threats to different targets from a given source, and these discernments affect their actions. In contrast, it is not impos-

sible for the observer's perspective to drastically simplify the relation – thus a source (e.g. a terrorist) may be viewed as a threat *per se*.

2. The observation of a threat to T can result in a wide variety of subjectively expected consequences for O. The way in which T is affected does not imply that O is affected in any specific way. Thus the effect of the relation on the one hand is to provoke social action on the part of those actors who are themselves under threat or who identify with T in a continuum of relative similarity. On the other hand, it also provokes action on the part of other actors whose interests are affected in a very different area through *cascade effects* (see below).

3. O both observes the relation and acts with the purpose of changing the relation.

The model thus does justice to the duality of the observer/actor status. The separation between source and target on the one hand and the observer on the other is an analytical one, since when real social actors assume the role of S or T, they always also observe the S-T relation in which they are involved. Empirically, therefore, S or T can be identical to O. Identity too is a subjectively construed concept which, as we learn from social identity theory, does not presuppose ontological similarity (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Often, however, S, T, and O are different specific actors in the same real context, for example three different persons.

In this situation, too, O is an actor who acts with reference to S and T.

The model addresses the issue that what the actor does can be explained only in terms of the actor's status as observer. For this reason, we emphasise the processes between the object level and the observation level. This analytical separation must be reversed elsewhere because the observer, as an actor, moves on the same level as S and T.

4. The actions of O are not necessarily directed immediately at the relation. To the extent that O is aware of the complexity of the relationships, he or she will act in an attempt to cause other observer-actors to intervene. Thus an appropriate analytical reconstruction of a threat figuration must occasionally include a multiplicity of actors.

We will speak of a threat as soon as any observer becomes aware of a harmful impact.

Harm without an observer is not a threat, and actors who fail to recognise a threat are irrelevant for the model. They are merely bystanders. However, bystanders may become observers and vice versa as a result of the social dynamic which we will discuss below.

By 'observation', we mean the very broad process of (1) the genesis of a mental image of real objects and (2) their evaluation in the minds of social actors. Observation on the part of social actors is characterised by incomplete and contradictory information, the addition and omission of aspects, an indirect access to reality, selective attention, selective information transfer, reduction of complexity, priming, promotion of interests, conscious and unconscious manipulation by other actors, and flexible evaluation criteria. On

the one hand, in the case of new kinds of phenomena it is unclear what the 'facts' are – even scientists are initially engaged in a process of gathering data, developing methods, testing hypotheses, etc., and whether scattered, unremarkable details constitute a phenomenon does not become clear until an observer claims to recognise a correlation and gives it a name. Even the construal of causality is a process that takes place on the observation level. On the other hand, information is linked with evaluation and conation, so that the evaluation of a phenomenon is a profoundly social process in which a collective evaluation criterion is applied or negotiated from scratch.

4.2 Processes

In essence, the model describes how an actor deals with a perceived threat, focusing on the way observations come about in social environments as well as on how an actor directly intervenes in the relationship of threat or exercises a communicative influence on other observers with the objective of inciting them to intervene according to the actor's wishes.

Significance appraisal refers to an observation process as described above which has the result of allowing the observer O to gain an understanding of what S is, what T is, and how T is harmed. This enables O to develop an appraisal of the consequences of the S-T relation for him- or herself. Harm sustained by T need not imply harm to O. The relation may even be irrelevant. O may even benefit in various ways, for example if O's opponent is threatened. The significance of the S-T relation for O displays a high degree of

contingency. However, the model aims to show that processes occurring against the background of a threat can only be understood if *all* the observers for whom a threat has positive or negative significance are taken into account, even if they are not themselves directly threatened by S. For present purposes, however, we are primarily interested in situations in which O expects to be the recipient of harm.

Observations are neither uniform nor static. The ascription of roles and causality and the evaluation of significance may differ, though not randomly so. The perception of many threats is subject to historical change and co-varies with social and cultural affiliation and with the presence of religious and political ideologies. Thus material poverty may be regarded as an act of divine providence, as the result of failure on the part of the state, or as the result of personal failure (Geremek, 1997). Even death can be reinterpreted as a benefit.

Frame alignment – a harmonisation of the reception of information and its evaluation – takes place within social aggregates. This mechanism allows scattered details to be perceived as a phenomenon and enables bystanders to become observers. Actors with the same interpretations and interests behave in the same ways; they may act synchronously as individuals – for example, as voters with identical voting patterns – or they may make a concerted appearance as a social movement whose spokespersons claim to represent an aggregate of interests.

An observer O_1 derives his or her evaluation of significance from observing S-T and, at the same time, from communi-

cating with other observers O_2 who supply information and frames. In modern societies, most observers lack first-hand information, so that the evaluation of significance is subject to intensive social transformation through the media and opinion leaders. It may be going too far to say that all knowledge of the world derives from the media (Luhmann, 2007: 1), since it transpires that people use various different sources of information to guide their actions when under threat. Nevertheless, the information that prompts people to act is almost always *mediated*.

Threats trigger actions on the part of an observer if they are associated with consequences which the observer is unwilling to accept. However, the observer must have sufficient resources for action. If the observer wishes to intervene in the relation directly, he or she requires power, force, material resources for compensation or for a counter-threat, expertise, and legitimacy. However, individual actors are unable to intervene themselves in many threats because they are too weak, or because they lack the competence or authority to do so. In such a situation, O_1 aims to use communication to mobilise those actors who have the necessary capacities. In this case, the crucial resources of O_1 are communication skills, vociferousness, articulacy, and influence. The core issue is not whether such resources are objectively present, but rather how the actor evaluates them – which is why we speak of capacity appraisal. Questions such as what constitutes a resource and how effective it is are subject to a process of social interpretation. That the potential of civil disobedience to topple a world power has been demonstrated in a single historical case

does not necessarily make that development replicable. Threats have conative effects that prompt action and turn observers into actors. Activation is the triggering of any kind of action with the aim of *averting, reducing, compensating, or profiting from* harm to oneself or to others. Two categories of intervention can be identified:

(1) *Direct* acts alter the relation by immediately changing S, T, or the mode of impact. Measures that minimise the perceived harm are known as *palliation*.

(2) *Social mobilisation* prompts other actors to alter the relation.

In social settings, interventions are contingent upon resources. For this reason, indirect activities occur. On the face of it, this is not unusual. All social organisms respond collectively to threat, for example by warning one another of enemies and defending themselves together. The mobilisation of social support is also mentioned in psychological coping theories. In the TISA model, however, such mobilisation is of central importance as it occurs in every situation. It exhibits several non-trivial peculiarities compared to a biological or psychological observation.

(1) Like any communication, it is fraught with uncertainty. Whether other observers interpret the communication according to the intentions of O always remains unclear. For this reason, social support cannot simply be summoned up on demand. (2) Because institutional actors in particular, but also all actors in general act in public, there are also unforeseen observers who are not taken into consideration by O and whom O cannot control. (3) Finally, the actors are aware that other actors too act in an interest-centred

way. Thus their aim as observers is to learn and take into account the reasons for the communication of threats and, in their capacity as actors, to conceal those reasons. As a result, indirect effects arise that are difficult to understand. For example, litigation PR may deliberately feed the media with information in favour of an actor (who is being prosecuted). This information has a lasting effect on observations by the legal and public sector. Another example of this kind is the advice to shout 'Fire!' instead of 'Help!' in case of mugging. 'Robbery' as a threat may be understood by other observers as a potential threat to themselves which they can avoid if they do not intervene. In contrast, 'fire' is seen as a general threat that is less easy to avoid and that makes intervention an urgent necessity.

Actors have different capacities for *second-order observation*. This refers to the capacity of an observer O_1 to anticipate the way a third observer would assess a situation. Based on a second-order observation, O_1 can tailor his or her own actions to make O_3 react in the desired way. While interventions may be performed naively and without reflection, dealing with threats nevertheless requires social actors to methodically take into account the mechanisms of observation. The ability to do so is of great importance in modern societies, since it is often the case that the only possible way of influencing the behaviour of other, formally autonomous actors is by directing their observations. The degree of skill possessed by given actors in this regard is an empirical question.

Against this background, threats, the observation of threats, second-order ob-

servations, and resultant actions form a network of social interactions and communications in which new threats become communicable. We will describe a second threat, in which at least one of the elements S, T, and O occupies a different place compared to the first threat, and in which at least one of these elements is again involved, even if it plays a different role, as a *cascade*. Cascades, therefore, are neither completely identical with their original phenomena nor completely separate from them. Although a stringent systematology of cascades has yet to be developed, we will describe a few types.

In a *cascade*, an O who has not hitherto been part of the threat relation either becomes a threat or identifies a threat to him or herself for the first time. This second (constructed or identified) threat is essentially different from the first, original threat and may be chronologically, geographically, and qualitatively remote from it. The transition from the role of observer to source can be occasioned by the punitive intervention of an agent of social control which threatens harm to deviant actors. The transition into the role of the target may occur in different ways. The simplest way is the ‘discovery’ of a threat. Sometimes the new threat is causally related to the reaction of other observers to the first threat, or to the failure of the new target’s own interventions. This is the case, for example, when a state actor intervenes in a threat to its citizens and notes that its failure leads to a loss of legitimacy. (This development is a component of the risk colonisation model; see Rothenstein et al., 2006.) Some processes in which cascades occur are evident, such as identification with similar actors or learning from social models.

The observer-target transition is of particular interest. Because of the unequal distribution of resources, there is an almost inevitable need to organise control, i.e. the regulation of threats, by means of a division of labour. This can result in the reduction of vulnerability and in the legitimate use of counter-threats on the basis of the state monopoly on punitive action. However, access to strategic resources is also linked to expectations which the actors entrusted with the control of threats must meet. These actors will be termed agents of control. Agents of control include parents, who are expected to protect their children, and doctors, who have a duty to their patients. In many cases, however, they are institutional actors such as the judiciary, the police, the government, or specialised social systems such as the armed forces or the health system.

What these actors have in common is that the observation of a threat to those under their protection actualises their responsibility, since the legitimacy of the asymmetrical division of labour is based on the expectation of subsidiary protective action in case of need.

This expectation may have a purely moral basis, but it may also be codified in law as in the case of the *right to protection*. Every threat S1 to every ward T1 thus raises the question whether the protector is discharging his or her duty. The protector thus comes under *role fulfilment pressure*. Failure would damage the perceived competence of the protector and thus harm the protector’s legitimacy. This danger, however, represents a threat to the protector – an entirely new threat. The threat S2 to the protectors T2 con-

sists in the impact of factors entirely distinct from S1, as they themselves are not necessarily threatened by factors such as disease. Paradoxically, S2 may consist precisely in the impact of T1 on the protectors T2, for example when discontent with the government is expressed. Against this background, it is interesting to observe how T2 behaves in order to avert negative consequences. In addition to actual measures for intervening on behalf of T1s, the available courses of action always include framing strategies that flank the actor's own competence, such as diversionary interventions against third-party threats, capacity-building *impression management*, denial of responsibility, and assignment of blame to T1.

5 Outlook

Theory is not an end in itself. Its value is determined by its ability to formulate constructive questions to put to the observable world. Thus the TISA model aims to assist in scrutinising the social processes that are set in motion by threatening scenarios. In our remarks thus far, we have confined ourselves to outlining the necessary elements for understanding how societies deal with threats, as well as to describing interrelationships between the various elements. We will now delineate the potential for future developments.

So far, we have not yet spoken about regularities. One important step will be to formulate testable hypotheses about the processes that unfold against the background of threats, such as the probability of certain reactions depending on the characteristics of the threat relationship,

cultural framings, the presence of public spheres, and the resources that are available to actors. When it can be suspected that phenomena are related, it is possible to search for *missing links* that may explain a cascade, such as the *stakes* held by observers, communication and information pathways, and frames that turn phenomena into threats. Additionally, it is possible to develop systematologies and classifications for actors, interventions, frames, and cascades. All these things together will eventually result in a theory consisting of logically consistent interrelationships of empirically testable propositions that are vindicated by research.

Such a theory should be able to capture the *dynamic* of threats. The TISA model already contains a number of dynamic elements. Observation and communication results in changes in the observations and behaviours of an initial set of actors and also expands the sphere of participants in the scenario. Thus the model explains why threats develop and why they sometimes acquire wider and wider ramifications. In this way it is possible to develop cybernetic explanations of positive and negative feedback loops in which source, target, impact, and observation are in continual flux. Additionally, the concept of the cascade maps non-linear qualitative leaps and changes in level. As a result of the observation of threats, there may even be shifts in meaning of particular phenomena that transcend the competence of individual academic disciplines. A dynamic in this sense of the word goes beyond a cybernetic interpretation, and developing dynamised hypotheses presents a major challenge.

The model also opens up a theory integration perspective. Governance research deals with concepts such as the *politics of fear* and *governance by risk*. Social psychology examines threats to social groups by outgroups and their consequences, such as prejudice and discrimination. Technology and technology acceptance research asks why innovations may be perceived as threatening and therefore rejected. Terrorism research shows that the political evaluation of violent movements as threats may be highly contingent and points out the importance of communication with public spheres – i.e. observers – for the participating parties. These and other disciplines study important sectors of the threat spectrum. However, their analytical potency is increased when they expand their models to include elements of other traditions. We offer the TISA model as a joint conceptual framework.

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