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Imagined Scenarios of Disruption

A Concept

When in the course of a press conference in February 2002 US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld explained the differences between “known knowns,” “known unknowns,” and “unknown unknowns,” his peculiar turns of phrase met with derision worldwide. In reality, however, Rumsfeld had disclosed central concepts of the political discourse of security, which describe three different types and manifestations of disruptive incidents. A disruptive incident that occurs in the domain of politics and society, for example, is initially defined as an interruption of an empirical regularity or of a normal expectation, which, depending on the degree of its severity, either returns to normal without outside intervention or requires an additional effort on the part of society to deal with it and absorb it (Koch and Petersen 2011: 9). Intended as an appraisal of the security situation in the wake of 11 September 2001, Rumsfeld’s triad differentiates between the kinds of threat potential linked to disruption and also represents three historically successive but now overlapping paradigms of society’s imagined dangers and its defenses against them. Ulrich Bröckling assigns the concepts of “hygiene,” “immunization,” and “precaution” to these apparatuses, thus selecting designations that are partly rooted in medical discourse and which, over the course of time and in the wake of a metaphorical transference, have also served to guide the measures taken in the politics of security (Bröckling 2012).

Following on from this historicization, we attempt to derive a theoretical approach from the fourth notion, “unknown knowns,” which revealingly enough Rumsfeld does not mention, and which enables us to conceptualize the connection between imagination and the discourse of security. In order to accomplish this, we combine research on the *future as catastrophe* (Horn 2014), as the latter figures in the popular imagination, with social and political analyses of historical as well as contemporary cultural techniques of security. In this way, the social role of the imagination and emotions – which is at best implicitly dealt with in sociological approaches to the production of security – is placed at the center of our deliberations. Our thesis is that modern societies are organized by historically varying “dominant fictions” of disruption (Silverman 1992: 15–51) and by the affective-political mechanisms and strategies of perceptual configuration that are bound up with them.

Originally published in German (Koch et al. 2016) and translated into English by Gregory Sims.

In the first part of the article, we briefly explain Rumsfeld's triad, in order to elaborate on his omission, i.e. the security policy aspects of the "unknown knowns." The subsequent section then deals with the role of imagined scenarios of disruption, which are relevant to both older apparatuses of security and to the "unknown knowns" in the paradigm of *precaution*. In the third section, we present a model that makes it possible to lend plausibility to the importance of imagination and emotions in the self-regulation of society, which have become not just quantitatively but also qualitatively more important within this contemporary paradigm. For in order to understand why imagined scenarios play such an important a role in the discourse of security, one needs to examine the affective dimension of imagined disruptions. Lastly, we work out a typology of disruptive events, which differentiates between disruptions involving predetermined breaking points [*Sollbruchstörungen*], adaptive disruptions [*adaptive Störungen*] and disruptions caused by (system) overload [*Überlastungsstörungen*].

1 Unknown knowns

Referring to Philipp Sarasin (2001), Bröckling shows that in the second half of the nineteenth century, under the paradigm of "hygiene," known and in principle combatable dangers ("known knowns"), whether internal or external to the "homogenous body" of society, were identified, then isolated or neutralized in order to prevent a possible spread or "contagion." Within the framework of this paradigm, any deviation from a norm became a symptom of a social infection, the pathogen of which had to be eliminated from the social body in order to restore healthy stability. Social hygiene was therefore the responsibility of State institutions, which kept social life under close observation. By contrast, in the age of "immunization," which began with cybernetic thinking in the twentieth century, the adversary takes the form of a "known unknown." In this case, while the dominant figures of disruption are known, at least on the basis of their destructive potency, they nevertheless remain invisible as enemies, becoming manifest above all in probability calculations and in an economy oriented towards risk management. Media devoted to identification, to detection and tracking down, but also literature and films, all work together here in the process of compiling the "manifestations of enmity" (Blumentrath 2014: 16).

In this apparatus, those who constitute a danger to society – criminals, terrorists, rampage killers – are always present and factored in. As "abnormals" (Foucault 2003), they play a role in the constitution of normality, thus they are simultaneously a requisite condition of society, they have to be taken into ac-

count, and can therefore no longer simply be isolated and directly combated as foreign bodies coming from the outside, as they were in the age of hygiene:

A range of theoretical perspectives – not only psychoanalytic, but also discourse-theoretical and even legal perspectives – make it possible to define such figures of exclusion not as the absolute other of these systems of order, but rather as their product. As such, they remain bound to the systems but, since they are subject to exclusion [...], they thus also potentially constitute a disruption and a threat to order. (Krasmann 2009: 140)

Society has to “vaccinate” itself against the enduring danger situation and its tangible and intangible agents (Esposito 2011, referring to Foucault). It does this by regulating the supply and management of disruptive stimuli on the social as well as the individual level, thus allowing the social body to develop tolerance to, and defenses against, danger situations and to learn to live with them. “Regulation” thus complements “regimentation,” since security can no longer be ensured by the State alone. Rather, citizens are now induced to develop resilience themselves, via cybernetic mechanisms: “The ‘activating State’ releases its citizens from the ‘safety net’ of being cared for into the freedom of self-care and expects them to assume responsibility for managing their own life-risks.” (Bröckling 2012: 99)

According to Bröckling, this immunization-oriented basic disposition of the modern State has been supplemented by a third security policy apparatus in recent decades, namely the paradigm of “precaution.” This paradigm further strengthens the supposition that the source of danger is fundamentally obscure and is thus an epistemological problem, and at the same time re-establishes the State as a potent agent. In the face of new wars and asymmetrical constellations of enemies, society now faces the diffuse threat of the “unknown unknowns” that Rumsfeld invoked in order to legitimize the Iraq war. With the omnipresence of a fully indeterminate danger, which is no longer system-immanent but rather always imagined as a system-threatening, “ultimate MCA” (maximum credible accident), the necessity arises to be proactive and to ward off potential dangers before they emerge. *Precaution* endeavors to ensure that a dangerous future does not turn into a future danger. Security policy is determined by events that are not statistically ascertainable but in principle possible: the calculation of probability, which is based on experience and serves to guide expectation via a corresponding prognosis, is replaced by the scenario technique, which is increasingly marked by a catastrophic imaginary. This technique possesses a high level of political effectiveness even when it generates very unlikely or even completely fantastic visions of the future. For when it has become undecidable just what form the coming disaster will take, any kind of envisaged threat becomes an occasion for preventive action:

Since we don't know what the threats look like against which we want to protect ourselves – the “sleeper” who lives completely inconspicuously and is planning an assassination; the unknown virus that triggers a pandemic and against which there is no effective vaccine – precaution consists first of all in imagining all possible threats, in the worst possible form. Instead of preventive defense against risks, risks are invented in a hyper-preventive fashion [...]. The activism of the precautionists generates what it wants to combat [...]. (Bröckling 2012: 101)

In these observations from Bröckling, which identify a constitutive blank space at the center of contemporary threat assessments, it becomes clear that imagined scenarios as well as socially produced emotions are of major importance for the contemporary discourse of security policy. The perpetual state of alarm characteristic of the regime of precaution (Ewald 2002) can only be produced by means of fictional scenarios that make it possible to anticipate and deal with the future by delineating danger situations *as if* they had already happened and actually been experienced. And far from being exclusive to think tanks and military or political command centers, these scenarios are now primarily developed in the popular mass media – in cinema and television, in computer games and internet forums, as well as in literary texts.

By presenting imagined threat scenarios in a concrete form, cinematic blockbusters and literary best-sellers are thus far more than pure entertainment. To the extent that it prepares society for possible disruptions and upheavals, popular culture becomes an interdiscursive agency of symbolic crystallization, of emotional intensification and the repercussive circulation of imagined threats. Using Richard Grusin's concept of “pre-mediation” as an additional point of reference, it can be said that in a world that is globalized and interconnected through the media, possible future scenarios are always anticipated and worked through in the mass media before the actual event occurs at all. In order to forestall the shock effect that live images of disasters can trigger, these disasters are played out in the mode of fiction before they become real or even probable (Grusin 2010: 38, 45). Leading the way, popular culture invents spectacular images and action plans for a future in which a disaster is unfolding or has already occurred. These imagined scenarios become politically effective because they produce communicative redundancy through their symbolic proliferation, they reduce complexity and, via the mode of narrative identification, they contribute to the establishment and consolidation of certain emotional regimes. Cultural scripts of disruption thus create a “reservoir of awareness” (Hartmann and Murawska 2015: 8), which – analogous to cultural and communicative memory – the individual and the social phantasy draws on to create images of the future, in which the disaster of the *diegetic present* could only come to pass because it was not foreseen and thus not prevented. In the twenty-first century, therefore,

popular fictions are of increasing social importance: they become central generators of a political imaginary, signaling urgency and justifying direct political action, and are thereby able to exert a strong influence on the occurrence of actual disruptive events and the way they are handled (Holm 2012).

It is interesting to note that the imagined scenarios of disruption with implications for security policy are subject to certain discursive conditions of possibility. The latter do not have their origin solely in the specialized discourse of security, but rather in a broader, interdiscursive milieu, a more exact profile of which can be brought to light by an analysis of pop-cultural productions. In order to designate these modalities of worldmaking – whose primary task is to provide a collectively shared version of reality with consistency –, Slavoj Žižek has proposed a fourth term, one that Rumsfeld neglects to mention, even though it is a self-evident constituent of his classification scheme:

What Rumsfeld forgot to add was the crucial fourth term: the “unknown knowns,” the things we don’t know that we know – which is precisely the Freudian unconscious, the “knowledge which doesn’t know itself,” as the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) used to say. [...] “Unknown knowns” are the privileged topic of philosophy – they form the transcendental horizon, or frame, of our experience of reality. (Žižek 2014: 11)

In the context of the discussion on security policies, the “unknown known” thus refers to the implicit knowledge circulating in society about the instability of normality, the knowledge that also structures the ongoing attempts to think beyond the limits of the imaginable, in the direction of unpredictable disasters. This knowledge remains latent, but precisely because it is latent, serving as a framework for collective conceptions of reality, it provides evidence and plausibility for specific, professedly hegemonic statements about the world and its future. This latent knowledge draws its sustenance to a large degree from the storehouse of images and narratives characteristic of contemporary fantasies of disaster (Sontag 1968), a storehouse that is continually brought up to date in the quite different media formats and narrative configurations of popular culture. As modern(ized) versions of a constitutive externality, the contents of this storehouse are bound up with social conceptions of normality, which construct society as a stable entity and thus form the implicit impetus behind all security policy measures – an impetus which is not, however, itself the object of discursive problematization.

2 The political and emotional work carried out by fictions of disruption: anxiety [*Angst*] and fear [*Furcht*]

To illustrate the specificity of imagined scenarios of disruption situated between the poles of security and danger in present-day society, it is worthwhile to take a look at the forms of the imaginary that were characteristic of older security apparatuses. In a lecture on the history of governmentality, in which Michel Foucault describes the emergence of security apparatuses in the eighteenth century, the rules and regulations of the law, of disciplines and finally of security are distinguished from one another and differentiated with regard to their governmental techniques (Foucault 2007: 67–71). The law – the oldest of the three systems in question and which historically was established well before the regime of hygiene –, operates with a code of the permitted and the forbidden, and specifies precisely what one must refrain from doing. It thus argues negatively and therefore focuses on social disorder, using the latter to develop a specific social order. For this purpose, it makes use of the imaginary, precisely defining the things and deeds that are permitted and forbidden. According to Foucault, the disciplines also function in the mode of the permitted and the forbidden, but have a special focus on what is permitted and thus regulate in fine detail the things and acts which they impose on individuals. In this way, disciplines have a complementary, enhancing effect on everyday life: a discipline turns out to be a productive power when – if one thinks of Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1995: 200–203; Bublitz 2010: 71) – policing observers are imagined for certain activities, thereby encouraging self-discipline in those under observation, and thus increasing productivity, to take just one example. Imagined scenarios of collectively binding behavioral standards that are subject to continual scrutiny can be effectively implemented in social reality and to a certain extent such scenarios provide the yardstick by which reality is to be measured.

Beginning in the early modern period, well before the modern conjuncture of the security policy paradigm, the imaginary played a central role in society’s orientation towards the future (Hölscher 1999). Now, in the age of security technology, political processes are focused directly on reality: they take the latter as a basis and provide instruments which make it possible to rectify undesirable situations. The security apparatus, which spreads out centrifugally and thus encompasses all social spheres, carries out a permanent empirical inventory of the populace, the economy or other social spheres, in order to be able to intervene in the event of an emergency or a disruptive incident. In contrast to the dis-

ciplines, this does not depend on a pre-established norm, with which reality would then be brought into line; rather, the norm is constructed flexibly, in the course of observing social reality, and then attempts to influence it (Lemke 1997: 190; Link 1997). The goal of the security apparatuses can be described using the concept of resilience: society is meant to be able to absorb disruptions, without their leading to drastic changes. To accomplish this, society must be able to reorganize itself autonomously and demonstrate the ability to learn and adapt (Bourbeau 2013: 7). It is a question of constantly maintaining an always-precari-ous state of equilibrium in a society that expects and works with disruption, which cannot be ruled out, no matter what steps are taken.

The imagination of disruption is assigned an extensive role in this context. If in earlier times the power of the imagination was focused on conceiving an ideal, positive future for society and distinguishing right from wrong, one's own from what was proper to others, this imaginative power now finds itself in a dynamic field, in which it has to react to ever-changing danger situations. As already indicated, it does this by developing scenarios and narratives that are drawn from an array of other imagined scenarios and placed in the foreground in order to capture collective attention. Against the background of a general atmosphere of insecurity, which makes Rumsfeld's "unknown unknowns" more and more the central reference point of the political horizon of expectation, the work of concretization carried out by fiction thus assumes a function as important as it is ambivalent. This process, whereby the space of a diffusely catastrophic future is occupied by narratives that offer more clearly delineated figurations of anticipated threats, can – from a political-emotional perspective – be linked with the transformation of a diffuse anxiety [*Angst*] into a concrete fear [*Furcht*]. Whereas an unbridled imagination may give rise to a "liquid fear" (Bauman 2006) which does not refer to specific objects or possible states of affairs but instead solely evokes the potential dangers in an increasingly unsafe and uncertain world (Furedi 2007), fiction can invent specific scenarios of fear [*Furcht*] and provoke active reactions, position-taking or adjustments in behavior in the respective *emotional communities*. Fiction accomplishes this by providing a narrative link between the past, the present and the future, and by depicting specific menacing objects or specific constellations of menacing situations (Koch 2013). Anxiety [*Angst*] – understood as an undirected expectational effect that can be transformed into directed fear [*Furcht*] by means of symbolic operations (Koch 2011) – thus also proves historically to be an important driving force in the conception of security (Marciniak, 2015: 348; Robin 2006).

In these times of the so-called "war on terror," catastrophic events can no longer simply be extrapolated from the past. Indistinct conceptions of the enemy render this impossible, to the same degree that increasingly asymmetrical

warfare nullifies classical distinctions like the front line and the rear, periphery and center. The apparatus of precaution reacts to this confusedly complex threat situation by spurring the imagination to ever more intense efforts, which then endeavors to satisfy the demand to make the present more secure by presenting catastrophic versions of the future displaying the greatest possible variance and radicality. The closing words from the cinema blockbuster *World War Z* (USA 2013) – “Be prepared for anything. Our war has just begun!” – provide the imperative for the politics of security in this changed global situation, which results in fictions that overturn the habitual narratives and generate new worlds of the imagination, to which preventive security measures then explicitly refer, or at least implicitly draw on as a resource, in order to bestow plausibility on their assessments.

Contemporary fictions do not describe positive states of affairs or abstract ideals which are meant to become a concrete reality sometime in the future, but rather in their massive accumulation they always merely serve as exemplary, up-to-date versions of a general danger situation – thus, ultimately, they are hardly more than structural placeholders. They no longer contribute to the strengthening of immunity or resilience in dealing with real disruptions and emerging threats, but rather, as a generalized “emotional style” of an imagined future (Gammerl 2012), they increasingly produce reverse effects. The merely formal indication of this *unmarked space* at the center of danger, which fictions in the age of precaution endeavor to grasp and represent, no longer solely serves the (ultimately) unburdening function of translating anxiety [*Angst*] into fear [*Furcht*], but rather simultaneously leads in the opposite direction, to an unleashed imagination and thus to the proliferation of new, undirected anxiety [*Angst*]. To some extent, this is a self-destructive side-effect of the logic of *total awareness*. For only “the idea of a future that is radically unsafe” gives rise to the continual production of imagined scenarios of disruption, which “in the name of boundless contingency” repeatedly seek to transform “uncertainty into a cognitive-emotional security of expectation” (Opitz and Tellmann 2010: 34–35). This work on a future conceived as fundamentally unsafe and uncertain thus enables a politics aligned more and more with the “security principle” (Sofsky 2005). At the same time, however, it undermines public confidence that the progress of things remains controllable at all.

In this way, the imagination accomplishes two things: on the one hand, it sets the direction for determining and sounding out the boundaries of the possible and, in a gesture of transgression, it enquires into new, previously unthinkable disruptions. On the other hand, it annuls the difference between reality and fiction, since its imaginative power always constitutes the framework of justification for new or changed realities and fictions. By imagining ever more scenarios,

this boundless, constantly expanding “sense of danger” (Engell et al., 2009) seeks to create a state of comprehensive preparedness in which the occurrence of the coming catastrophe is ultimately always presupposed, and where all that remains is to practice dealing with the consequences (Anderson 2010: 791). This leads to a situation where emotional and imaginary processes become the essential driving forces of security policy discourse. In the model below these processes are therefore presented as central components of the social production of meaning.

3 Imagined scenarios of disruption: a model of social circulation

The model proposed here attempts to present and consolidate essential components of the social processing of disruptions (see Fig. 1):

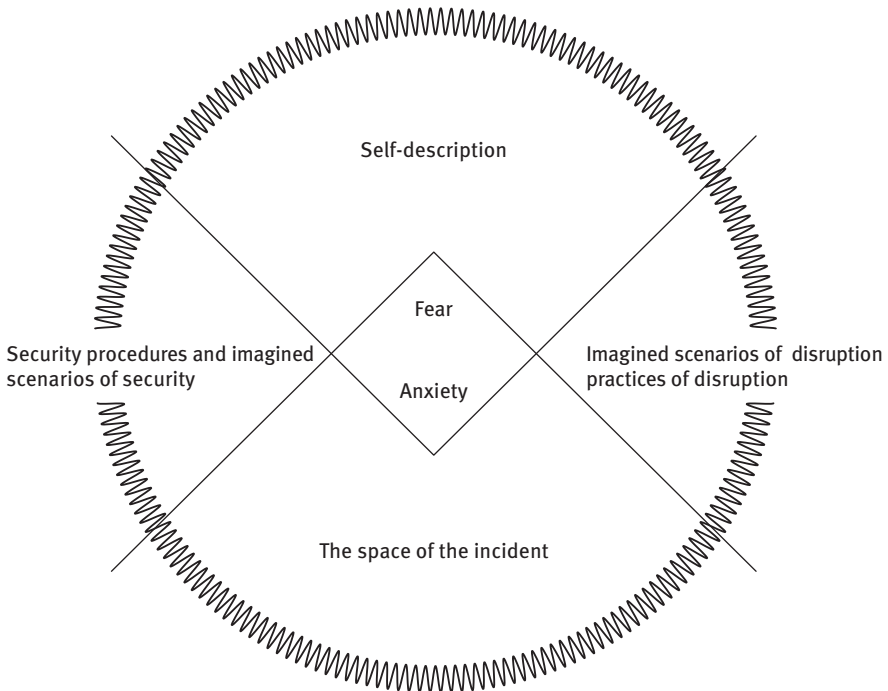


Fig. 1: A model of social circulation.

The space in which an incident occurs is a domain oscillating between expectation and surprise, a space in which threatening events are stored in a virtual form and generate a diffuse anxiety in line with certain social debates. Should an incident occur that was previously undetermined, a directed fear [*Furcht*] emerges, which then becomes an object of negotiation between security procedures, the imagined scenarios of security as well as the practices and imagined scenarios of disruption. In this space we situate self-descriptions but also fear-laden [*furchtbesetzte*] scenarios, to which specific techniques and rituals provide the response. For example, security scanners at airport baggage and security control points suggest protection against both imagined and real threats, while at the same time drawing the passengers' attention to a specific threat situation. Societal self-descriptions are also involved in this process of negotiation between security and disruption (Luhmann 2013: 167–174): they endeavor to process the respective disruptions and integrate them into their system. All three levels interact with each other in the media and discursively, exercising mutual influence, with the imagined scenarios, which mediate between the levels, being of central significance.

In the space of these imagined scenarios, two major, typical forms of the imagination can be distinguished. The imagined scenarios of security, which create a sense of identity and stability, provide society with positively connoted images: the American flag in the Hollywood film for example, or heroic figures who perform cultural scripts of crisis management and bring the behavioral standards of “disaster capitalism” (Klein 2007) up to date. In this form, the imagination establishes norms, values, and concepts of State-assured order, of national identity, history, and tradition, and creates collective ego-imagos, which allow a society to describe itself as a unity, in spite of ruptures and dynamic upheavals. In this process, indispensable to the functioning of every State is the imagination of power, as it is attributed to the State by the population, combined with traditional images of power. (Holert 2008)

This imagination of the State, its formation as a sovereign authority that guarantees security and order, is ensured by regularly repeated rituals, symbols, images and narratives all serving the purpose of self-assurance, and which, in turn, in the course of a politics of visibility and utterability are themselves pre-figured and re-configured. These acts and images that are supposed to underpin the State can, of course, come to nothing, can thus uncouple themselves from the citizens of a society. Once a supposedly solid, imagined framework no longer functions because its collective plausibility and self-evidence have been lessened as a result of unforeseen events, a misjudgment of the State's power is exposed (Legendre 2012: 35). The bond between State institutions and society turns out to be so disturbed that the sovereign exercise of power perhaps now

only exists as the construct of a deluded government and has less and less influence on the lives of individual members of society in the here and now. The Bush administration's poor crisis management after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which caused a high loss of acceptance among the population, can serve as an example here. When endorsement turns into rejection, State sovereignty and one of its central foundations – namely sovereignty as an imagined construct – are threatened (Koschorke 2002: 77), which can have serious consequences for a society's dominant self-descriptions: the “unknown knows” of the hegemonic self-descriptions no longer function without being contested, but instead become visible as superseded premises of an inapt self-description. In this way, disruptive events can generate epistemic effects by putting the functionality of a society's positive self-conception to the practical test, laying bare their implicit premises.

States seek to pre-empt such crises of confidence by producing imagined disruptions and dangers beforehand, and citizens must be geared for the task of defending against them. Imagined scenarios of security as a motor for steering collective emotions are therefore coupled with a second motor, namely imagined scenarios of disruption. The aesthetic effect of the latter aims to render society more dynamic – a society in which perpetual uncertainty facilitates repeated re-organizations of its governmental structures. The scientific as well as popular fictions that generate possible futures and try to represent these in a plausible fashion thus have an effect on everyday practices: they can be expressed, for instance, in the form of new architectural structures, such as bollard systems, jersey barriers or safety glazing, which imperceptibly become accepted features of the cityscape, or in internalized forms of behavior and in instilled reactions, or in institutional handbooks – for instance, the *Zombie Preparedness Guide* of the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2011). Both types of imagination, which are interrelated and involved in constant mutual re-signification through corresponding *shifting images* (Richard 2003f: 41), also have an effect on the emotions of the populace: as a condensation of communicative practices, they generate feelings of belonging and identification as well as a general form of “low-level fear” (Massumi 1993: 24), which places society in a state of diffuse apprehension in the face of the unknown, commits it to certain desirable outcomes and predisposes it to certain self-conceptions and conceptions of otherness.

Structurally, a security policy designed for the contemporary world, which is focused on future dangers but which no longer, or only to a limited extent, has the traditional security techniques and technology at its disposal, is faced with a multitude of problems. On the one hand, it has to deal with the fact that potential disruptions can only be reliably imagined to a limited degree: the Fukushima disaster or the terrorist attacks in 2001 left such an indelible mark in the constitution of modern western society because these events exceeded the bounds of

what was considered possible, geo-politically and technologically, despite the pre-(con)figurations available in the media. The virtual field of conceivable futures was durably shaken up, shattered, and consequently altered. On the other hand, the imagined events do not just prepare society for possible dangers, they also weigh up different problem areas and scenarios, or they even can take on a life of their own and prompt fatal auto-immune reactions (Derrida 2003). In this case, the imagination generates a kind of positive feedback: precisely because anxiety [*Angst*] tends to dispense with probability estimates and risk calculations in favor of worst-case scenarios (Sunstein 2005; Clarke 2006), preventive measures tend to lead to an accelerating, boundless spiral (Bröckling 2008: 42), which in turn produces further disruptions. This may provide an explanation for the present-day situation, where the talk is of a comprehensive dismantling of civil rights, a fetishization of transparency, and a security policy fixation on Big Data. Such diagnoses are also symptomatic in that they render especially palpable the implicit rules and structures of the imaginary production of danger scenarios, as well as the “unknown knowns” underlying these scenarios.

The dominant societal self-description thus ultimately results from the interaction of these two different types of imagination and from the emotions of anxiety [*Angst*] and fear [*Furcht*] which are bound up with them, which to some extent make up the two aggregate states of the social imagination: if the future can be conceived and described in clear scenarios, then anxiety [*Angst*] is successfully translated into fear [*Furcht*], and society then possesses a stabilized space of possibilities. In the age of precaution, however, this stability proves to be insufficient – even in the medium-term – to hold together a society that is exposed to manifold centrifugal forces, politically and socially, which is why the concrete scenarios have to be continually dissolved and re-figured, in a permanent process of generating potential new disasters. According to Frédéric Gros, contemporary societies can therefore no longer be characterized as stable orders, but can only be thought of as ecological systems in which security is exclusively the result of the constant balancing of irregularities, of a practice of continually rectifying disruptions in real time, and of a continuous, inexorable symbolic transformation of anxiety [*Angst*] into fear [*Furcht*]. As a “specific, irreducible form of power,” work on the space of the social imagination, fluctuating as it does between regulation and intensification, is a hallmark of security apparatuses. It can be described as a “process by which a living entity preserves its inner balance, and thereby dynamically maintains itself,” writes Gros, echoing Foucault (Gros 2015: 226).

Accordingly, society is not perceived as secure only when there are no more disruptions, but rather at a prior point, where disruptions can be reliably dealt with and assimilated by the security apparatuses. The socio-ecological resilience

of the system is manifested on the one hand by its self-regulating competence, which means it is robust enough to deal with disruptions by relying on existing institutions, such as the police, which to a certain extent also contribute to rendering disruptive events invisible. On the other hand, the system must be able to reorganize and thus renew itself, through productive impulses coming from outside (Bourbeau 2013: 7). The imaginative engagement with the disruption in question is coupled with the latter's magnitude as well as its degree of expect- edness. As is suggested in the following section, resilient systems place ruptures that can be anticipated under the heading of "disruptions involving predeter- mined breaking points," whereas the reorganization of a security system requires adaptive competence in dealing with "unanticipated disruptions." "Disruptions caused by (system-)overload" stretch the collective imaginary as well as the se- curity apparatuses to their limits or even cause the collapse of the prevailing schema of an imagined confrontation with a possible disaster.

4 Typology of disruption

Using the model outlined here, a typology of disruption can be drawn up which proceeds from the complex interference between events in the space of the inci- dent and the imagined scenarios of security and disruption. In the poststructur- alist theory of the event, two types of event were proposed (Baudrillard 2008: 100–121) in light of the terrorist attacks of September 11. On the one hand, there is the non-event, meaning an event that has been repeated countless times in one or another variation and is therefore well known in its structure and its sequences. Examples include royal weddings, the Olympic Games, or – although perhaps a controversial case – classical warfare. On the other hand, there is the event proper, conceptualized as an event that irrupts in a completely unforeseen way, an event that cannot be derived from the past and for which there are therefore no comprehensive cultural scripts and narratives available. While for Jean Baudrillard the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York belong to the latter event-type, Jacques Derrida (2007: 446) wonders whether the description of an unforeseen event is possible at all, because the event loses its uniqueness and becomes repeatable, once we put it into words and thus neutralize it.

Following on from this, disruptions – which are always also events – can be situated between the boundaries of the non-event and the singular event, and can be more finely differentiated. The categorization into *disruptions involving predetermined breaking points* [Sollbruchstörung], *adaptive disruptions* [adaptive Störung] and *disruptions caused by (system) overload* [Überlastungsstörung] al-

lows us to outline an array of possible disruptions, ranging from routine disruptions to singular disruptions, and, as a result of their varying potential to unsettle, the political, emotional and cultural work required to counteract a disruption is specific to each case.

Thus, the term *disruptions involving predetermined breaking points* describes disruptions that can be expected to occur at any moment. As is the case in cybernetic systems, which are equipped with built-in breaking points designed to prevent positive feedback in the event of a disruption and thus return the system to a state of equilibrium, disruptions involving predetermined breaking points are occurrences that society is familiar with, where institutions such as the fire brigade or the police are available to restore order and security. In other words, these are disruptive incidents that a society can deal with routinely, and which – individual cases aside – do not create a collective sense of insecurity. That said, such incidents nevertheless remain disquieting, and they are thus prominent in the social imaginary – as is illustrated, for example, by crime fiction and the detective novel. As a continually repeated, local destabilization of the sense of security in a social reality presumed to be “secure,” the crimes depicted in crime novels make it clear that only through the constant imaginary eradication of possible disruptions can this reality be provided with an anchor point that is at all credible (Boltanski: 2014). Thanks to certain familiar scenarios or scenographies, such as the crime show or courtroom proceedings, institutions such as the police or the judicial system also generate imagined scenarios of security. Although it is clear that a disruption of the normal, everyday situation has occurred, the message conveyed is that the disruption is being dealt with in a predictable and presumably effective manner, and therefore the social order itself remains intact. If an incident is classified as a disruption involving a predetermined breaking point, this classification can be considered the result of functioning, institutionalized procedures and – above all – of communication processes, which refer to the social imaginary.

Adaptive disruptions, on the other hand, are characterized by ruptures that occur and unfold in a way that departs from what is envisaged by a society’s preventive measures. At the same time, these are incidents that can be put to productive social use, since the disruption in question generates new forms of knowledge and appeals to a society’s ability to learn. Such an event is narratively delimited, given a name, and processed in media such as film and literature, so that, in a second step, it can be integrated into the cultural narratives and thus be neutralized. In this process of working through and healing, which has to be thought of as a polyphonic interaction of a range of quite different actors, discourses and media, both the security institutions and the affective processing mechanisms are successively adapted, so that the rupture, should it occur

again, can be immediately dealt with as a disruption involving predetermined breaking points. From the point of view of security policy, adaptive disturbances alter a society in an evolutionary sense, and are processed within a framework of de-escalation and flexible re-normalization.

One example that allows us to comprehend the logic of adaptive disruptions is the Edward Snowden affair. On the one hand, the NSA revelations are bound up in complex legal, diplomatic and security-related procedures; on the other hand, as a collective symbol of the surveillance State, they are simultaneously the object of manifold practices of reflection and articulation in the spheres of popular culture, the arts, and civil society. How exactly a disruptive occurrence is to be grasped in each instance has to be examined on the basis of the individual case: on the one hand, we have terror scenarios in the sphere of popular culture, such as *24* (Fox 2001–2014) or *Homeland* (Showtime since 2011), which present the digital-electronic investigative work carried out by the secret services as a normal component of a world waging a “war on terror.” While in these works surveillance is accorded the status of the self-evident, there are, on the other hand, fundamental critiques of the digitalized society of control, found in novels such as David Egger’s *The Circle* (2014), in films such as *Citizen Four* (USA 2014), or in theory-oriented critiques, such as Geoffroy de Lagasnerie’s *L’Art de la révolte: Snowden, Assange, Manning* (2015), where the whistleblower is presented as the emblematic, disruptive social figure, critically intervening against the powers that be.

As a third category, *disruption caused by (system) overload* designates a crisis or disaster that leaves a society or a person disoriented, confronting them with a completely unknown situation – thus an “unknown unknown” in Rumsfeld’s sense. The term *disruption caused by (system) overload* encompasses, on the one hand, a psychological affliction such as a trauma, which can be the result of armed conflicts or violent attacks, both on the individual and collective level, and which is devastating precisely because it breaks through the mental and media mechanisms that protect us against stimulus overload, and that are meant to ensure the adaptive capability of the individual or the collective. The shockwaves of such a dramatic event manifest themselves in a particular referent, leaving traces in everyday reality that culminate in overload and some form of outburst or irruption.

On the other hand, the concept of disruption caused by (system) overload entails a coming apart of signs and referents, a world thrown out of joint, described in psychoanalysis as the irruption of the real (Žižek 2002: 16–17), and which can be interpreted as an epochal event. Such an event cannot be symbolized or imagined in advance and casts a fundamentally critical light on all existing symbolic security systems. As a horrifying social event which calls into question the

social order and its routines of normality as a whole, the disruption caused by (system) overload – one thinks of 9/11 – acts as a *shape-shifter*, effecting “a change of the very frame through which we perceive the world and engage in it” (Žižek 2014: 10).

Disruptions caused by (system) overload do not necessarily have to mean the end of the world, but – as a result of absent or overtaxed routines of communicative normalization – , they are experienced as such a massive, anxiety-provoking rupture that their retroactive symbolic processing, at least in Western cultural circles, often draws on the semantics and narratives of the end of the world or the biblical Apocalypse. Applying an up-to-date form of these familiar cultural schemata and plots to a disruptive event makes it possible to gain some initial distance to it, which can then enable a follow-up process of reflection.

For their part, imagined scenarios of disruption seek to encompass all three types of disruption. While disruptions involving predetermined breaking points are always confined within their established horizons (Virilio 2007), the adaptive disruption takes the latter to their limits and alters them. Disruptions caused by (system) overload are located, by definition, beyond the limits of what is conceivable; at the same time, however, they constitute the techniques of the imagination that deal with these fundamentally unanticipated disruptions, techniques which, in turn, occupy the center of attention of political security apparatuses in the twenty-first century. Even if this type of disruption is the key political issue in the age of precaution, there is still a real space of events that exceeds even the imagined scenarios of disruption caused by (system) overload. What is presented in imagined scenarios as a disruption due to (system) overload and portrayed as the end of the world as we know it – an attack of extraterrestrials, a new ice age, a global blackout – is no doubt designed to remove all limits from the imaginary, but it can only be expressed because, ultimately, it is still conceived within the framework of the available categories and discourses, whether as a politically-charged instrument of orientation in an ever more confusing world, or as an unconscious registry in the sense of the *unknown knowns*. The model sketched out here thus shows that all three historical apparatuses delineated by Bröckling can actually exist simultaneously and in different states of mutual interference. The difference between them lies in the form of interplay and in the orientation of the imagination, which either transforms anxiety [*Angst*] into fear [*Furcht*] or, increasingly in our times, fear [*Furcht*] into perpetual anxiety [*Angst*]. Against this background, a cultural diagnosis of popular media that focuses on the symbolic production of security apparatuses and analyzes popular narratives and images of disruption makes it possible to advance to the foundations of hegemonic identity politics.

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