Elites and Panic: More to Fear than Fear Itself

Lee Clarke, *Rutgers University*
Caron Chess, *Rutgers University*

> *Attributions of panic are almost exclusively directed at members of the general public. Here, we inquire into the relationships between elites and panic. We review current research and theorizing about panic, including problems of identifying when it has occurred. We propose three relationships: elites fearing panic, elites causing panic and elites panicking. We use numerous examples, including our own research on the 2001 anthrax attacks in the United States, to illustrate how these relationships operate. The argument is evocative, not definitive. However, the conceptual utility of explicitly theorizing the relationships between elites and panic shows, among other things, how power works in disasters.*

Sociological research on how people respond to disasters has been going on for more than 50 years. From that research comes one of the most robust conclusions in sociology: panic is rare. There is detailed research on supper club fires, airplane crashes, epidemics, hurricanes and so on. Regardless of whether the hazard is dramatic or mundane, whether there is a low or high body-count, or whether the threat is acute or chronic, social scientists agree that "panic" explains little that is important about how people, in collectivities, respond to disaster (Helbing et al. 2000). In 1954, Quarantelli, a founder of modern disaster studies, cautiously concluded that "compared with other reactions [to disaster] panic is a relatively uncommon phenomenon." (1954:275) By 2002 he said, more boldly, that "...the concept of panic within collective behavior in sociology may disappear as a technical term in the future." (Quarantelli 2002:11023)

But recent attention by social scientists to "the problem of panic" suggests that the rumors of the death of panic may have been exaggerated. A string of scholars have reconfirmed Quarantelli's earlier view (see Clarke 2002

2003; Johnson 1987a; Mawson 2007; Tierney 2003, 2006), each arguing that the facts of social science research speak against popular images and representations. Epidemiologists and anthropologists (Glass and Schoch-Spana 2002) have argued persuasively that the public ought to be included in bioterrorism response plans, because official fears of panic are unfounded. Johnson has done extensive empirical work on the problem of panic, concentrating on a "crush" at a rock concert and a fire in a supper club (Johnson 1987b, 1988; Johnston and Johnson 1988). In both cases, Johnson demonstrates that panic is a poor explanation for why people died.

In spite of this accumulation of evidence, the image and problem of public panic endures, for several reasons. Intellectually, the problem of panic endures because it illuminates some fundamental aspects of social relations. For when panic occurs – and no one denies that it happens – it is clearly a case, as Durkheim might have it, of the breaking of bonds that unite people. Similarly, the absence of panic in disastrous situations illustrates the strength of social bonds, the endurance of moral obligations and the power of socialization.

"Panic" also endures for political and practical reasons. Despite the crushing weight of sociological findings that panic is rare, Birkland (2006), who has conducted extensive research on the matter, argues that the disaster plans of policy makers and emergency management personnel assume it is likely. Planners and policy makers sometimes act as if the human response to threatening conditions is more dangerous than the threatening conditions themselves. Politically, the problem of panic endures because, as Tierney (2004, 2007) argues, it resonates with institutional interests. Operating on the assumption that people panic in disasters leads to a conclusion that disaster preparation means concentrating resources, keeping information close to the vest, and communicating with people in soothing ways, even if the truth is disquieting. As Tierney points out, such an approach advances the power of those at the top of organizations.

The organizing issue of most scholarship on panic has been its frequency (i.e., how often it happens), and sometimes why the panic myth persists. But other, neglected, issues are also interesting. One set of questions arises because most of the research has been conducted in the United States. This is unfortunate because cultural factors powerfully shape how people respond to that which poses sense-making challenges, of which disaster is obviously a subcategory. Were there more systematic cross-cultural research on panic, scholars would be better positioned to address carefully the conditions under which panic is more or less likely to happen. We would also benefit from a thorough assessment of the occurrence and conditions of panic in "natural" and "technological" disasters. The analytic utility of the distinction between natural and technological disasters has been questioned (Hewitt 1983) and research on the September 11

attacks and the Exxon Valdez oil spill point the way toward its obliteration (Marshall et al. 2003; Picou et al. 2004). But the distinction has not yet been obliterated – there do seem to be consistent differences in how people make sense of what they perceive to be natural disasters as opposed to technological ones. Though doubtful, the possibility should be left open that "panic" could be a useful concept in that distinction.

Another set of questions concerns the analytic status of panic. Blum's (1996) important work theorizes "fear" in general, contrasting "sociological" and "postmodern" views of the idea of panic. Briefly, Blum says that sociology sees panic "…as a distortion, as an extraordinary departure from the normal…" while for postmodernism panic is "…a metaphor for the 'ruins' of contemporary life…" (Blum 1996:677) It would take us too far afield to consider his argument in detail.

Clarke (2006) claims that the panic attribution is applied only to the general public, or more precisely, people not in positions of authority. Policy makers, planners and emergency responders direct the rhetoric of panic against the "public." The powerless, not the powerful, are said to panic. Arguably one reason for the rhetorical distinction is that the term panic is pejorative, usually coupled conceptually, if not literally, with claims of "irrationality." Perhaps another reason is that the non-powerful are more often gathered in undifferentiated groups as compared with the powerful. The image of panic is generally associated with large numbers of people, and elites do not congregate, making it hard to transfer the image of panic to them. One does not see collections of chief executive officers amassed in a stadium, and so it is highly unlikely that a story will ever appear about "CEO panic" in response to a soccer stadium fire. Still, this is not a sufficient explanation for "panic" to be so rarely attributed to people in positions of authority. For one could in principle explain the actions of chief executives, heart surgeons, Army generals or university officials by alleging that they panicked in certain situations. Yet such explanations remain rare.

This may be unfortunate because perceptions – of opportunities, risks, hazards or projections of the future – are important indicators of how managers, an example of an elite group, think and act. Smallman and Smith (2003) argue that whether managers will be convinced of the likelihood of some event depends on their beliefs, values and perceptions. Weick (1993, 1979) argues that we should give conceptual primacy to the sense-making practices of managers, practices that are central for understanding how people order the stimuli and environments they confront. Shapira (1995:48) conducted a careful study of managers' conceptions of risk. "Risk taking," he says, "is an endeavor where a manager can use his judgment, exert control, and utilize skills." Previous research demonstrates clearly the importance of how elites think about risk, process information, conceive courses of action and respond to threats.

In this article we consider explicitly some of the relationships between elites and panic. Our treatment is not a systematic empirical investigation. It is a conceptual one, primarily, and as such has important limitations. "Conclusions" are tentative, and any claims of "findings" would be gratuitous. Our hope is that our treatment will spur further conceptual development and systematic empirical research.

We consider several relationships between elites and panic – that elites can fear panic, that elites can cause panic, and that elites can themselves panic. Underlying our warrant for asserting these relationships is the notion that to the extent that the phenomena are real they are important, because by definition people in relatively powerful positions command more resources than those who do not. To the extent that there are relationships between elites and panic then understanding those relationships illuminates the exercise of power regarding disaster, in particular, and possibly in general.

Recognizing Panic

Definitions of panic have been somewhat inconsistent. In his early work Quarantelli (1954:269) said that "flight," driven by an overwhelming sense of fear, was "the outstanding feature of panic…" His more recent article keeps to much the same definition (Quarantelli 2002). Smelser (1963:131) added a cognitive element to Quarantelli's definition. Panic is, he said, "a collective flight based on a hysterical belief." Johnson defined panic in several ways. He and Feinberg (2001:270) said panic is "unregulated competition" and a "loss of social control." In another article he defined it as including "both fear and a breakdown of social ties." (Johnson 1988:8) Clarke (2002:21), following the Oxford English Dictionary, defined panic as an "excessive feeling of alarm or fear… leading to extravagant or injudicious efforts to secure safety." The sociological literature on "moral panic" has not engaged the literature on disaster, but using the word "panic" in its organizing concept suggests the relevance of one to the other. Moral panics are over-reactions to putative conditions, but where that which is actually threatened is not physical well-being – the usual case in disaster studies – but values or a sense of propriety. "The term moral panic," say Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994:36), "conveys the implication that public concern is in excess of what is appropriate if concern were directly proportional to objective harm."

It may be that this last phrase, about a disproportionate concern for objective harm, is the source of so much conceptual difficulty regarding panic. For the very idea of "disproportionate concern" requires a standard of judgment that defines appropriate concern. Making this judgment is exactly the same problem faced in other areas of thought, particularly

concerning risk perception. The short version is that there was once a time when scholars addressed risk perception issues in terms of how "subjective risk perceptions" stacked up against "objective risk assessments."[1] The "perceived risk-real risk" dichotomy has been abandoned by scholars (but not consultants) for several reasons, the most important being that it is a thinly-veiled justification for privileging expert opinions and institutional interests in controversial situations (e.g., where to locate a nuclear waste depository, how to clean up oil spills, whether genetically modified foods are acceptable, etc.).

To make a judgment of disproportionate concern requires a point of comparison. One comparative point is the formal risk of an adverse event. "Risk," says a report from the National Research Council, "can be defined as a hazard, a probability, a consequence, or a combination of probability and severity of consequences." (NRC 2007:26) It is often the case that the probability of occurrence is emphasized while consequences are neglected. For example, proponents of civilian nuclear power will usually argue that the likelihood of an accident is vanishingly small, as the saying goes, so it is irrational for anti-nuclear protestors to try to shut down a plant. The protestors' fear, in this telling, is out of proportion to the real risk. The general point is that if the risk of something is low, but the reaction to it is high, then a judgment of panic might be called for. For example, in Culture of Fear, Glassner argues that people "worry about the wrong things." (See also, Wildavsky 1997.) A good example from Glassner (1999:30) is "the myth of Halloween bogeymen and bogeywomen." Using Best's work on the "razorblade in the apple," Glassner emphasizes that there are no documented cases of stranger-initiated poisonings of children on Halloween (Best and Horiuchi 1985). "Halloween sadists," he says, are "fictitious creatures…" (Glassner 1999:31) Glassner is using the actual occurrence of the event (or non-event) as a point of comparison to judge that the fear is out of proportion to the threat. Such arguments seem to adopt the "perceived-real" framing by relying on the expectation of proportionality between a risk and a response.

Another point of comparison for judging that people overreact is the opinion of experts. This is the comparative heuristic most often used by "moral panic" scholars. This is important for moral panic theory because many of the "hazards" that it addresses concern wild claims, for example, that thousands of children are abused by Satan worshipers every year or that there is an "epidemic" of illegal drug use (for a thorough examination and copious examples see Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). No objective probability distribution exists for such outlandish claims, yet moral panic theorists know they can not simply announce that there is a panic without some sort of independent indicator. The informed opinion of expert judges serves as a functional alternative to a probability distribution.

At the individual level, subjective feelings about a hazard could lead to uncontrolled flight, and this is the popular image of panic. At the collective level, such feelings could lead to a stampede, a breakdown of social control mechanisms, or the dissolution of network ties. The scenes in disaster movies of people running pell-mell through the streets or the mall, pushing aside the weak and sickly to save themselves, sometimes even running into the hazard, illustrate the popular conception well. An additional part of at least a popular conception of panic is that it gives rise to extremely self-interested behavior. The few scholarly examples come from cases in which too many people are trying to escape from an enclosed space such as a burning nightclub or a soccer stadium that has been tear gassed (Helbing et al. 2000).

Distinguishing between the subjective and the objective aspects of panic can sometimes be used to recognize when panic has happened, but doing so is tricky. This is because people can feel utterly overwhelmed by fear and yet not act on those feelings. For example, airplane crash survivors will sometimes tell scribes of the "panic" and "chaos" that they just lived through. Yet descriptions of actual behavior, even from the same person, are quite different – helping older people or the injured out of the plane for example. In August 2005 an Airbus A340 skidded off a runway in Toronto in a heavy storm, quickly caught fire and ultimately burned nearly completely. A passenger would later report that "people were screaming and panicking. The fear really was that the airplane would blow up." (Powell and Goo 2005) The A340 is a large, four-engine aircraft, yet all 309 people aboard the plane survived. According to Canada's Transportation Safety Board, "the complete evacuation was effected in less than two minutes." (TSB 2005) Some estimates are that the plane evacuated in 90 seconds. It is hard to conceive of such a successful evacuation if the passengers were actually behaving in a panicky fashion. Although we cannot develop the point here, such uses of "panic" suggest its rhetorical value, that the word is sometimes used to convey the seriousness of an event or to exaggerate the danger so as to impress an audience.

While there is some utility in distinguishing between the cognitive and emotional sides of panic on one hand, and the behavioral side on the other, ultimately this conceptual move is insufficiently social to help us recognize panic. We propose that panic is a breakdown in social order, a breaking of social bonds, as a result of some fear, which itself creates more danger.[2] Panic is sometimes attended by a perception that there is insufficient time to make an informed decision (Drabek 1986, Tierney et al. 2001). In Decision Making, Janis and Mann (1977:51) wrote that hyper-vigilance, "…which in its most extreme form is called panic, arises when time is short for escaping from on-coming threat." The threat may range from potential threats to life to destruction of a decision maker's

reputation. When the perception of the magnitude of threat is heightened by a sense that time is running out, "the decision maker is likely to search frantically for a solution, persevere in… thinking about a limited number of alternatives, and then latch onto a hastily contrived solution that seems to offer immediate relief."[3] The immediate relief is injudicious.

The important insight from Janis and Mann, which has not been developed in the literature on disasters, is that panic is a category that applies generically across social statuses. None of the other definitions confront this critical point. Although few panic, anyone who makes decisions can. Decision makers sit in boardrooms and lead government agencies. They fly airplanes as well as ride in them.

Elites and Panic

Here, we propose three relationships between elites and panic: that elites sometimes fear panic, that elites can cause panic, and that elites can themselves panic. There are perhaps more such relationships. We understand "elite" to be a relational concept, so that someone or some position is elite vis a vis someone else or other position. This means that to be elite is not static: the mayor of New Orleans is elite with respect to New Orleanians but not with respect to the President of the United States.

Elites Fear Panic

The literature on disaster planning, as well as our own research, suggests that elites sometimes fear public panic. Ironically, when they do their concerns can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, "…a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the original false conception come true." (Merton 1968:477) An example is the massive evacuation around Three Mile Island. On March 28, 1979, one of the two TMI reactors "scrammed" – an emergency shutdown – and over the next several days came dangerously close to becoming a full-scale disaster. Officials and experts did not know that at the time, of course. Indeed one of the major problems they confronted was that they did not have an accurate picture of what was going on inside the damaged reactor. They did know that radiation had escaped containment, and that there was a possibility of a much greater, and completely uncontrolled, release as a result of the core melt that was in progress.[4]

On March 30, Pennsylvania Gov. Richard Thornburgh announced that pregnant women and children of preschool age within a 5-mile radius of Three Mile Island should evacuate.[5] The Governor was also considering seeking an official disaster declaration from President Jimmy Carter and advising a more general evacuation. According to the timeline in the Report of the President's Commission on the Accident at Three Mile

Island, one of Carter's representatives asked the Governor not to make an official request (official requests for disaster declarations qualify states for substantial federal support):

> "He said that it was their belief that that would generate unnecessary panic, that the mere statement that the President has declared this area an emergency and disaster area would trigger a substantial panic; and he assured me that we were getting every type and level of federal assistance that we would get if there had been a declaration. I told him that I would have to have his word on that, an absolute assurance, and that if that were true, I would go to the Governor with his request that we not formally ask for a declaration."[6]

Another instance in which official behavior at TMI was shaped by a fear of panic concerns how the public was first notified that one of the reactors was in trouble. A reporter at a local radio station, using a CB radio, heard that police and firefighters were mobilizing. The station's news director called the nuclear facility, expecting to be connected to a public relations officer. Instead he was connected directly with someone in the control room, who said "I can't talk now, we've got a problem," although he denied any fire engines were onsite. The news director was finally put in touch with the utility's manager of communications services, who said that there was a "general emergency," and that, "The plant is shut down. We're working on it. There's no danger offsite. No danger to the general public." And that is the story we went with at 8:25. I tried to tone it down so people wouldn't be alarmed."[7] The point is not to judge whether the news director's choice was the right one, but that his message was formed in response to a presumption that people would panic.

One result was the evacuation of nearly 150,000 people around the crippled nuclear plant. To be clear, their largely spontaneous evacuation was not itself a panic. People were being given incomplete and vague information about a hazard that they knew could harm them. After the Governor advised that pregnant women and young children should evacuate, a great many more people who were neither apparently judged the risk of a meltdown to be sufficiently dangerous that they too evacuated. In the moment, it was a sensible plan for risk management. But from the point of view of officials, mass evacuation is exactly what they were trying to avoid, but precisely what their own panic produced.

Elites' fear of public panic can also lead to hoarding information, even though wide dissemination of information may be the most productive course of action. This is clearly a breakdown in social bonds across social

statuses. For example, Tierney reports that "in spring 2002, the federal government avoided informing public officials in New York City about a credible threat involving nuclear material that had surfaced in fall, 2001…" (Tierney 2004:37) Those federal officials were apparently afraid of public overreaction should the nuclear threat be publicized. Doing so, of course, meant there could be no opportunity to mentally or physically prepare. Had the threat been realized, had there been some sort of nuclear event in New York City, decision makers' failure to notify people of the risks they faced would have likely increased the amount of suffering and certainly decreased levels of institutional trust. Elite panic about the possibility of panic would have been more dangerous than the non-elite panic that might have ensued had a nuclear threat been announced.

Chess and Calia (2002:1039) proposed that "…leaders charged with maintaining public order become overwhelmed by the fear of causing public panic." (see also Chess et al. 2004) Clarke (2002) suggested similarly that leaders sometimes panicked about panic, operating on incorrect assumptions about how people react to hazards. Note that when public panic happens the disrupted relational bonds are those within the status group: patrons of a restaurant, fans in a football stadium, passengers in a plane. When elite panic happens, however, the disrupted relational bonds are those between status groups.

Elites Cause Panic
As moral panic theorists have sometimes stressed, elite decisions and actions can cause a panic. In moral panic theory, indeed, elites sometimes cynically create disproportionate fear – this is what moral panic theory regards as panic – designed to further their interests in some way, usually by deflecting attention from "…the real problems in the society, whose solution would threaten or undermine the interests of the elite." (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994:135)[8]

In any case sometimes elites can cause panic, but this has been neglected in the disaster literature. One example comes from the anthrax attacks in the Fall of 2001. Although only five people died and more than 20 were infected from exposure to B. anthracis, 20 percent of people living in and around Trenton, New Jersey, said they were affected (Blendon et al. 2003; Chess and Clarke 2007), and public service organizations (police, local health departments, etc.) were inundated with thousands of calls from concerned citizens over "white powder" scares.[9] Across the country, more than 46 percent of people thought anthrax was contagious (Fischhoff et al. 2003). It was common to see people in New Jersey opening their mail outside, even though no B. anthracis had been found in their community. (We've not seen systematic data on this, however.) The National Research Council (2005:1) reports that "more than 30,000 people

were given prophylactic antibiotic therapy." Sales of Cipro (ciprofloxacin hydrochloride), the antibiotic distributed to postal workers as a prophylactic, increased by 40 percent (Brooks 2001). Insurers in Washington state, an area without any sign of B. anthracis, reported claims for prescriptions of Cipro were twice that of the previous year, although the surge in demand quickly abated (Healthwire 2001). Americans drove to Tijuana and other border towns to buy the drug more cheaply in quantities sufficient for their families (Brooks 2001; Winter 2001).

During the anthrax crisis, people were not forming an altruistic community, which mainstream disaster research says will happen after severe community disruptions. Instead, they distanced themselves from others in a self-protective mode. Some hoarded Cipro despite pleas from officials concerned about sufficient supplies for emergency responders or postal workers who might require prophylaxis. One might reasonably conclude that people were panicking over the possibility of exposure to B. anthracis. But why?

One reason concerns leaders' communication tactics. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (2003:17) concluded that "fear in the community could have been reduced, if [health agencies] had been able to release more information to the media and the public." A postal worker, expressing great concern over possible exposure, complained that "Not one person from the postal service told me to see a doctor, go to the hospital or do anything. There was no communication."[10] After it was announced that Bob Stevens, a photo editor for the Florida-based National Inquirer, had contracted pulmonary anthrax, Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson said on Oct. 5, 2001 that: "People should not go out of their way and do anything other than what they're doing."[11] The times were anything but normal, yet Thompson was urging people to act as if they were. Indeed, less than a month after September 11, the entire country was on "high alert" for another possible terrorist attack. Thompson also opined that that "We do know that (Stevens) drank water out of a stream when he was traveling to North Carolina last week." (NRC 2005:62) Similarly, Florida's Lt. Gov. Frank Brogan, referring to Stevens, said that "There is no reason to think that this incident is anything other than what we have seen in the United States over recent years." And yet this was the first case of pulmonary anthrax in the United States in 25 years, and Stevens would later die from it. Such statements were obviously meant to be palliatives for public concern but created the conditions for a panic instead.

Medical historian Judith W. Leavitt (2003) tells the story of an 1894 smallpox outbreak in Milwaukee, where riots lasted a month as some residents refused to be vaccinated and authorities responded to their refusals with great force. The residents were, indeed, more afraid of the vaccine than the disease, while the authorities seemed to be most

afraid of the residents. Leavitt's description leaves little doubt that there was panic in the streets. But she also leaves little doubt that politicians and public health officials caused the panic. Poor people were forcibly removed from their homes while the rich were allowed to shelter in place, as we would call it today. Public health officers wore uniforms that suggested they were in the military, frightening the substantial immigrant population so that many of them did not report sickness or report for vaccination. All the advisories and orders were issued in English so many immigrants could not understand them.

Whatever social bonds may have existed between elites and non-elites in Milwaukee, especially immigrant non-elites, had clearly been eroded or dissolved in the panic produced by political leaders, the police, public health officials and media members. As Leavitt documents, elite-induced panic in Milwaukee was responsible for more death and suffering than would have occurred had all groups been treated with dignity.

Elite Panic

Our final consideration of the relationship between elites and panic is that elites can themselves sometimes panic. This is a controversial claim, at least from the point of view of mainstream disaster research, which has been arguing against the "panic myth" for so long that using the word "panic" at all is anathema. And yet there do seem to be examples of elite panic. Tierney (2008:131) characterizes some cases of elite panic in the aftermath of Katrina:

> "Elite panic was shockingly evident during Katrina, as evidenced by media and public officials' obsessions with looting and lawlessness, the issuing of shoot-to-kill orders, arising primarily out of a concern with property crime; and the rush to act upon rumors that circulated regarding the "savage" behavior of lower-class community residents, immigrants, and people of color."

It may well be that Tierney's analysis over applies the idea of "elite panic" in Katrina. What seems sensible, however, is her argument that the official "obsession" with looting created elite panic regarding the so-called "shoot to kill orders." On Sept. 1, 2006, Gov. Kathleen Blanco said at a press conference:

> "These troops are fresh back from Iraq, well trained, experienced, battle tested, and under my orders to restore order in the streets. They have M-16s and they are locked and loaded. These troops know how to

shoot and kill, and are more than willing to do so if necessary. And I expect they will." (ABC News 2005)

There never was any official shoot-to-kill order (such are even rarer than public panic or declarations of martial law). But that isn't Tierney's point. Rather, her point is that Blanco's reaction was a case of elite panic, with non-trivial consequences. Misinformed about conditions on the ground and overly fearful of the loss of property, officials turned resources away from rescue in New Orleans. Elites responding after Katrina were disconnected from non-elites and obviously fearful of them. Further, their actions and inactions created greater danger for others.

Early in the morning of Jan. 31 2007, in Boston, Massachusetts, a transportation worker saw a suspicious package in a subway station. Bomb squads were soon investigating similar cases across the city. The objects had been placed under bridges, close to a medical center and other places of public congregation (Ellement et al. 2007). Fearing improvised explosive devices, Boston police closed highways and bridges, and fire trucks and ambulances were deployed extensively. Traffic was snarled throughout Boston, and the Coast Guard "…closed the Charles River to all water traffic from the Museum of Science to the locks where the river flows into Boston Harbor because of the reports of bombs on several bridges." (Ellement et al. 2007) Police destroyed one of the packages to determine if it contained explosives (BBCStaff 2007).

Two independent advertisers had mounted a guerilla market campaign for an animated movie based on the Cartoon Network's animated series, Aqua Teen Hunger Force. The main characters of the show are the Mooninites Ignignokt and Err, who sometimes hold up their middle finger during the show. The devices that the police mistook for IEDs were of Ignignokt, outlined in light emitting diodes, holding up his left middle finger.

The consequences of the official panic were substantial. The head of Cartoon Network had to step down from his job, which he had held for 13 years (Weber 2007). Turner Broadcasting, owner of Cartoon Network, had to pay the city of Boston $2 million and apologize. The two men responsible for placing the cartoon devices were arrested, charged with placing hoax devices that might cause "…anxiety, unrest, fear, or personal discomfort…" A "hoax device," according to Massachusetts law, "….shall mean any device that would cause a person reasonably to believe that such device is an infernal machine." (MAGeneralLaws 2007) (Ultimately, the charges were dropped after the men performed community service.) And of course there were considerable opportunity costs of the elite panic, as city organizations expended resources chasing phantoms.

Faced with admitting that they panicked, officials tried to keep the spotlight of blame trained on the two men who planted the devices. "It's

clear the intent was to get attention by causing fear and unrest that there was a bomb in that location," Assistant Attorney General John Grossman said at their arraignment (AP 2007b). "The appearance of this device and its location are crucial," Grossman said. "This device looks like a bomb." The foot-tall signs, illuminated at night, apparently had protruding wires and batteries. The Massachusetts Attorney General said as much when she exclaimed that "It had a very sinister appearance. It had a battery behind it, and wires." (Lothian and Feyerick 2007) Other officials sounded similar notes of outrage and alarm. Rep. Ed Markey charged the men with "Scaring an entire region, tying up the T [Boston's subway] and major roadways, and forcing first responders to spend 12 hours chasing down trinkets instead of terrorists is marketing run amok." (Lothian and Feyerick 2007) Boston Mayor Thomas Menino intoned that "…it's no time for anyone to panic." (CNN 2007)

But elites in the Mooninite case did panic. As noted, two men were charged with planting hoax explosive devices, but the Mooninites looked nothing like an IED. There is nothing on the devices that would make a reasonable person believe they were looking at an "infernal machine." The devices had been in place for over two weeks, and non-officials came upon them frequently, but were not alarmed. In fact, the devices coexisted peacefully with people in nine other cities across the nation for more than two weeks. In none of the other cities, either, were denizens alarmed. The sheriff of King County, in which Seattle resides, said that "To us, they're so obviously not suspicious ... We don't consider them dangerous… In this day and age, whenever anything remotely suspicious shows up, people get concerned – and that's good. However, people don't need to be concerned about this. These are cartoon characters giving the finger." (Lavoie 2007) Contrary to what Rep. Markey said it was not the advertising guerillas, but police, officials and the media who scared "an entire region."

Another consequence of elite panic can be professional recreancy. In Freudenburg's (1993:716-17) hands, "recreancy" is the failure to be trustworthy or reliable in an official capacity. An example of professional recreancy comes from the 2001 anthrax crisis when a physician dismissed available evidence, discounted years of training, and despite questioning by other professionals, maintained unsubstantiated fears about his own vulnerability. His panic resulted in sub-par professional performance. One prominent infectious disease doctor who practiced at a New Jersey hospital told us, in an interview, of other physicians beeping him in the critical care unit, interrupting medical emergencies because of fears for their own safety.

> "I had [doctors] insisting they needed a smallpox vaccine. And I would say, 'Let's think. You went to medical school with me. You know what we were

taught. Let's try to remember what we were taught about the smallpox vaccine. Like we don't give it anymore. Do we remember any of this?' And it was like, 'Well you must surely have some.' I'm like, 'No.'

Some of his callers persisted: 'Well, you must be lying, 'cause I know you probably have some, and you probably immunized all your friends.'… 'Well, did you do your [wife]?' they would ask me. And it was like, 'No, I haven't done myself either, because I don't have any and I don't think it's indicated right now.'"

The fear of the physicians who were trying to acquire smallpox vaccine was not in accordance with objective data, medical training, expert advice, standard practice or professional courtesy. Their panic also potentially put others in harm's way. These physicians, understandably suffering great stress, exhibited "competitive," "individualistic" behaviors that disrupted a clinical setting – the consequence of elite panic in this case. Physicians after all are supposed to be devoted to helping people, and their panic in this case illustrates what can happen when social bonds are rent in the face of uncertain hazards.

Discussion

We are proposing that social scientific approaches to understanding disaster might benefit from examining the relationships between elites and panic. In any given case the three relationships we've examined – elites fearing panic, causing panic and themselves panicking – might overlap or not be immediately distinguishable. Our claim is most controversial, and tenuous, regarding the idea of elite panic. We believe that elites panic just as non-elites do. Because the positions they occupy command the power to move resources, elite panic is more consequential than public panic. Further, employing "panic" in an explanatory role in accounting for the behavior of people in positions of authority, rather than the general public, highlights the discretion of authorities rather than the constraints of their positions. This is not to say that they choose to panic. No one chooses to panic. It is to say that when people in positions of authority panic their responses influence organizational action, which, in a disaster, can mean the difference between effective and ineffective response.

Panic is an attribution that is almost exclusively applied when looking down at people who do not occupy positions of power or authority. But panic can also be seen by looking up, although it is rare that anyone does so. We expect elite panic, which might also be called powerful panic, to

be rare and even more difficult to diagnose than public panic. Among other reasons, the powerful are more likely to defend their behavior than to acknowledge vulnerability (or allow researchers to probe it). Moreover, we expect that attributing panic to elites will continue to be unusual for good reasons. The level of proof necessary to demonstrate panic among any actors other than unaffiliated individuals is high. One reason for this is precisely because unaffiliated, disparate individuals are relatively powerless and so do not command resources that would allow them to deflect the panic label. Such resources would include access to positions of authority in powerful organizations, centrality of location in significant social networks and key vocabularies of motive.

Because elites usually function in organizational settings, social scientists tend to accord causal primacy to structural factors when accounting for elite behavior. So, when leaders of government agencies and corporations under stress brush aside facts, neglect or forget their training, and neglect standard practice, we usually label such behaviors "organizational inertia," "production pressure" or "bureaucratic politics." Such things are never called "panic." But that may be a mistake. For it may be that the conventional categories smuggle into analysis vocabularies of motive that misdirect our attention, obscuring issues of responsibility and the power to act. If we aver social structure as "cause" when agency would be more appropriate, there is a mis-specification about the conditions and motivators of action.

There is another point to make concerning elite panic and organizations. It may not be insignificant that all of our examples would probably be interpreted, by those affected as well as analysts, as having anthropogenic origins. In the introduction we pointed out the tenuous existence of the natural/technological disaster distinction in social research. Ultimately, we think that distinction will die an unnatural death because even when the hazard originates in nature it is the configuration of social organization that results in, or avoids, damages. Until the distinction dies, however, a working hypothesis might be that the more likely a risk or disaster is interpreted as anthropogenic in origin, the more likely we are to find elite panic. Clarke (1988:27) argued that "since powerful organizations are crucial actors in modern society, understanding the causes and consequences of their decisions is an important task for social scientists." Beck continually emphasizes the connections between modernity and hazards with anthropogenic origins (Beck 1992, 2006; see also Rosa 2006). It is indeed organizations in modern society that create important hazards and disasters, often involving technology, that the rest of society must deal with. Organizations also create elites of greatest consequence. When they panic their organizations can exacerbate modern disasters.

We expect elite panic to be more likely when decision makers are under intense media scrutiny or when considerable financial or reputational

resources are at stake (on the importance of reputation to managers, see Power 2007; Shapira 1995). Such conditions might foster panic because they may encourage quick rather than deliberative action. The need to appear decisive might lead to rash actions, possibly ones that put others at greater risk than would otherwise be the case. We might also expect elites to panic when the tasks they confront are ambiguous. If there is uncertainty or disagreement about distributions of responsibility there may be overwhelming pressure to act precipitously.

Future research should distinguish between panic and mistakes, hubris and executive failure. Perrow (2007) proposes the idea of "executive failure" which has affinities with the idea of elite panic, but is clearly different from it. Perrow (2007:292) says that executive failure occurs when "deliberate, knowing choices are made by top executives that do harm to the organization and/or its customers and environment." It is the willful turning away from situations, facts and the like so that short term interests are maximized while long term responsibilities (e.g., safety) are forsaken. An example might be the administration of President George W. Bush ignoring evidence that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, insofar as that ignorance was deliberate. Panic is different from this conception of executive failure, because panic is never "deliberate" or "knowing." But the two concepts are clearly in the same genre, because social bonds across statuses do not hold fast.

Mistakes are different from panic. It is wise to distinguish mere mistakes, even dishonest mistakes, from analysis or action that could be judged irrational, or would deviate from standard professional practice, such as the doctor's demand for a smallpox vaccination. Therefore, selfish behavior that pushes the edge of standard practice, such as the recent examples of creative accounting among financial organizations, would arguably be mistaken, unethical, unwise or even stupid, but would not be judged as panic. Misjudging how the future will unfold still maintains a very strong element of judgment and forethought, two cognitive moments usually absent in panic. Finally, we would distinguish between elite panic and hubris. Both involve the dissolution of or the absence of bonds between elites and non-elites. Hubris, however, is marked by pride and arrogance, moments of excess in their own right but different from panic in the same way that mistakes are.

In this article, we are able only to suggest some of the broad outlines of how the notion of elite panic could be used in thinking and writing regarding risk and disaster. The idea is obviously applicable outside those domains as well. More systematic research will be necessary to gauge the power of the idea, as well as the empirical conditions that give rise to it. A particularly fruitful area for future research will be to locate elite panic within literatures on power in organizations (Tierney 2007).

If the concept of elite panic is going to be useful in social theory we need more conceptual development and a great deal more research. We especially need to avoid a tendency to apply "panic" uncritically or glibly. As disasters increase in frequency and severity, it has become increasingly important to explain the dynamics of human response to situations of risk, hazard and calamity. Because of our own intellectual interests we have used work on disaster and risk to propose some ideas about the relationships between elites and panic. But the notion of elite panic is more broadly applicable. Wherever power, perceived risk, and decision pressures are in the same social space, elite panic is a possibility.

Notes

1. Some key citations concerning this point: Fischhoff, B., A. Bostrom, and M. J. Quadrel. 1993. "Risk Perception and Communication." Annual Review of Public Health 14:183-203, Freudenburg, William R. 1988. "Perceived Risk, Real Risk: Social Science and the Art of Probabilistic Risk Assessment." Science 242(October):44-49, Perrow, Charles. 1999. Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies. Princeton University Press, Slovic, Paul. 1993. "Perceived Risk." Risk Analysis 13(6):675-682.

2. In Mass Panic and Social Attachment Mawson (2007) argues that many behaviors that get labeled "panic" are actually instances of attachment seeking, as when people run with others to flee a burning building. This is a helpful conception of the relationship between panic and social bonds, but is not directly relevant to our task in this paper.

3. Of course, all decisions might be better given more time to consider the options. At some point, however, one would hit a diminishing marginal utility for further consideration of options. What Janis and Mann, et al. are talking about is a telescoping of time so extreme that a choice is made seemingly without reflection.

4. The core of a nuclear plant melts when the rods containing the radioactive material aren't sufficiently cooled. Half of the core at TMI-2 melted.

5. The reports of the President Commission on TMI are here: http://stellar-one.com/nuclear/index.htm. That is the source of the facts in these paragraphs.

6. http://stellar-one.com/nuclear/friday_march_30_1979.htm

7. http://stellar-one.com/nuclear/Wednesday_March%2028_1979.htm

8. It may be possible to synthesize research and ideas regarding moral panics and disaster. How that would happen is not immediately obvious to us, however, because moral panics are about threats to power, authority, legitimacy, and values while the hazards studied in disaster research threaten life and property.

9. Bacillus anthracis, or B. anthracis, is the bacterium that causes the disease called anthrax.

10. 3/17/04 *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

11. Last accessed June 13, 2008 at: http://abcnews.go.com/Health/story?id=117206&page=1.

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