CHAPTER FOUR

DANGEROUS DOGS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF RISK

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Introduction

In the last decade of the twentieth century widespread anxieties about the risks associated with ‘dangerous dogs’ were addressed through legislative change in the UK. The introduction of canine breed specific legislation (BSL) in the form of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 was designed to completely eradicate certain types of dog, particularly those identified as ‘pit bulls’. The processes that led to legislative intervention raised questions about the role of dogs in urban spaces and the social identities of dog owners, as well as asking who should take responsibility for the regulation and management of human/companion animal relationships. The situation was complicated by the production of knowledge about dangerous dogs from competing authorities and problems with the identification and classification of canines as ‘breeds’ or ‘types’. Heightened public anxieties about canine-associated risks were reported in the popular press along with calls for immediate government action as debates about dangerous dogs became intrinsically linked to discourses of antisocial behaviour, masculinity, violence, the erosion of national identity, social responsibility and drug culture.

Despite ongoing criticisms that the 1991 Act did not address the problem of dangerous dogs in the UK, the legislation has provided a regulatory model that has been adopted across parts of North America and Western Europe, and in Australia and China. The spread of breed specific legislation suggests that the discursive construction of dogs as risks remains meaningful across national and cultural boundaries. Canine ‘risk’ may have a global character but there are important differences in the ways in which the production of knowledge about dangerous dogs and the associated discourses of risk have been handled, mediated and produced at a national level.
Following other studies which address the global/local nature of risk (Caplan 2000; Tulloch & Lupton 2003), this chapter is concerned with the specific social and cultural conditions and frameworks of understanding that gave rise to the emergence of dogs as risks in the UK.

Informed by a social constructionist position which acknowledges the global character of risk, here discourses of dangerous dogs are considered as mediated, contextual and historically situated. Rather than adopting the view that risk is democratically shared, this approach accepts that risks are culturally perceived and socially constructed and that risk is unevenly distributed across a society (Lupton 1999). By taking this position and combining risk theory with the concept of moral panics this chapter examines how the issue of dangerous dogs led to a reevaluation of human/companion animal relationships in the UK with newly articulated divisions between an idealised moral majority of ‘good dogs and owners’ and a deviant subset of ‘bad dogs and owners’.

Using television and newspaper reports and transcripts of parliamentary debates I examine the frameworks that have tied discourses of dangerous dogs and pet-keeping to the dissolution of social structures in the UK. I explore how the disruptions to social hierarchies, characteristic of reflexive modernity, and the perceived threats posed by dogs were part of a wider process of risk management that used media images to organise public understanding. From a range of national and regional media sources I then examine the uses and appropriations of images of ‘dangerous dogs’ and the consequent redefinitions of certain canines as risks and ‘abject’.

Risk

The concepts of risk and risk society provide a particularly useful theoretical and critical standpoint from which to discuss the discourse of dangerous dogs and the implementation of breed specific legislation in the UK. Risk, in a more general sense, has been theorized from a range of sociocultural perspectives to provide insights into governmental strategies of regulation, critiques of modernity from the vantage point of reflexive modernity (Beck 1992) and, understanding of the cultural investments in symbolic boundaries (Douglas 1966). Each of these aspects of risk theorization offer valuable routes to consider questions around the production of lay and