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The politics of fear appears to dominate public life in Western societies. We have become very good at scaring one another and appearing scared. These days we indicate our disagreement with a public figure by announcing to the world that we **find him or her frightening**. 'I find Bush really scary' or 'I am really frightened of what Blair is likely to do' is another way of saying that I dislike their views. From the food we consume to our anxieties about children, being scared has become a culturally sanctioned affectation that pervades all aspect of life. Yet too often we tend to trivialize the dimension of this phenomenon. Commentators often blame a particular politician or party for 'practicing' the politics of fear. Unfortunately this practice is not restricted to a particular party. For example during and after the 2004 American Presidential election, many democrats adopted a posture similar to that of Bush. For example, Don Hazen the executive editor of the on-line publication, *AlterNet* warned that the 'fear factor is often overlooked by progressives, who frequently make appeals to logic on the assumption that if people know all the facts they will act accordingly'. Hazen felt that 'intellectual arguments' are 'not at their most potent at this juncture' and therefore 'facts and analysis must be accompanied by a vision that addresses safety'. In other words 'progressives' too, must learn to make the fear factor work for them.

The politics of fear is symptomatic of the pervasive sense of exhaustion and disengagement that affects public life. **Public life in general and politics in particular is in danger of losing its sense of meaning and purpose** . It is easy to overlook the fact that this is not simply a problem for the professional politician. Cynicism and suspicion towards politics ultimately represents cynicism and suspicion towards one another. Statements like 'I don't trust politicians' or 'I don't believe what they say' simply rationalize the retreat from public life. **They convey a profound sense of fatalism and suggest that politics is a pointless exercise** . These sentiments are not the inevitable response to the misdeeds of public figures. In previous times people have reacted to politicians that they do not trust by getting rid of them or by even trying to change the system. Today people are more likely to react by switching off and disengaging from public life.

If politics is indeed pointless then we are quite entitled to fear everything. In modern times politics provided the promise of people being able to exercise a degree of control over their destiny. **From the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century onward, politics was associated with the project of conquering Fate** . One important legacy of this process was that humanity was less prepared to accept an externally imposed destiny. People became less disposed to accept disease and death. Fewer men and women were prepared to accept acts of misfortune as the will of God. And more and more of us came to believe that their lives could be altered and improved. Politics was embraced because it offered the promise of choice and alternative paths to the future.

Thankfully most of us are still not inclined to accept our fate. People spend billions on health care, they attempt to slow down the process of aging and even alter the way they look. People travel hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles in search of a new life. But while we attempt to gain a measure of control over the direction of our individual circumstance, we find it difficult to give direction to public affairs. Rather, a sense of political exhaustion seems to govern public affairs. **The clearest manifestation of this trend is the tendency to see people as the objects rather than the as the agents of change.**

The politics of fear can flourish because it resonates so powerfully with today's cultural climate. Politicians cannot simply create fear from thin air. Nor do they monopolize the deployment of fear; panics about health or security can just as easily begin on the internet or through the efforts of an advocacy group as from the efforts of government spin doctors. Paradoxically, governments spend as much time trying to contain the effects of spontaneously generated scare stories as they do pursuing their own fear campaigns. The reason why the politics of fear has such a powerful resonance is because of the way that personhood has been recast as the vulnerable subject.

To understand the sense of powerlessness that pervades public life it is necessary to look at the way contemporary culture influences the way we regard ourselves as human beings. The prevailing sense of diminished subjectivity is underwritten by a distinct code about the workings of human behaviour and personhood. Every culture provides a set of ideas and beliefs about the nature of human beings and what constitutes their personhood. Our ideas about what we can expect from one another, how we handle

uncertainty and change, deal with adversity and pain and how we view history are underpinned by the particular account that a culture offers about personhood and the human potential. **The defining feature of the current Western 21st century version of personhood is vulnerability** . Although society still upholds the ideals of self-determination and autonomy the values associated with them are increasingly overridden by a more dominant message that stresses the quality of human weakness.

What I have called elsewhere therapy culture casts serious doubts about the capacity of the self to manage new challenges and to cope with adversity. Individuals confronted with the ordinary troubles of life are now routinely advised to seek professional advice and counseling. The belief that people exist in a state of vulnerability informs the way that we are expected to make sense of our experiences. As a cultural metaphor, vulnerability is used to highlight the claim that people and their communities lack the emotional and psychological resources necessary to deal with change, to make choices and to deal with adversity. **Popular culture too encourages the view that sees communities and people as weak and in need of support. Such people are unlikely to play the role of active citizens. They are also entitled to live in a state of fear.**

That is why fear often serves as the foundation for public discourse. Nor is the promotion of fear confined to right wing hawks banging on the war drums. As noted previously, often the critics of 'the politics of fear' are directly involved in alarmist claims making activities. They have made a powerful contribution to the creation of a situation where everyday mundane subjects such as children's health, food or the quality of air are regular topics for scare stories. **Fear has turned into a perspective that citizens share**

**across the political divide.** Indeed the main distinguishing feature of different parties and movements is what they fear the most: the degradation of the environment, irresponsible **corporations** , immigrants, pedophiles, crimes, global warming , weapons of mass destruction.

**In contemporary times, fear migrates freely from one problem to the next without there being a necessity for causal or logical connection .** When the Southern Baptist leader Reverend Jerry Vines declared that Mohammed was a 'demon possessed pedophile' and that Allah leads Muslim to terrorism in June 2002 he was simply taking advantage of the logical leaps permitted by the free-floating character of our fear narratives. This arbitrary association of terrorism and pedophilia can have the effect of amplifying the fear of both. The same procedure is adopted when genetically modified products are stigmatized as Frankenstein Food. **Politics seems to only come alive in the caricatured form of a panic.**

In one sense the term politics of fear is a misnomer. Although promoted by parties and advocacy groups it expresses the renunciation of politics. Unlike the politics of fear pursued by authoritarian regimes and dictatorships it has no clearly focused objective other than to express claims in a language that enjoys a wider cultural resonance.

**Possibly one of the distinct features of our time is not the cultivation of fear but the cultivation of our sense of vulnerability .** While it lacks a clearly formulated objective the cumulative impact of the politics of fear is to reinforce society's consciousness of vulnerability. And the more powerless we feel the more we are likely to find it difficult to resist the siren's call of fear.

The precondition for effectively countering the politics of fear is to challenge the association of personhood with the state of vulnerability. Anxieties about uncertainty become magnified and overwhelm us when we regard ourselves as essentially vulnerable. Yet the human imagination possesses a formidable capacity to engage and learn from the risks it faces. Throughout history humanity has learnt from its setbacks and losses and has developed ways of systematically identifying, evaluating, selecting and implementing options for reducing risks. There is always an alternative. Whether or not we are aware of the choices confronting us depends on whether we regard ourselves as defined by our vulnerability or our capacity to be resilient.