



The NY Salon presents
'Living in a state of fear'

Tuesday 20 March 2007 at The New School, www.nysalon.org

Fear Rules: Contemporary Fear Culture by Frank Furedi

The aim of this paper is to examine the components of what constitutes the experience of fear in contemporary society. Its focus is on how fear works and to isolate the key dimension of today's fear culture.

Contemporary Fear Culture

Threats are mediated through cultural norms that instruct us how to respond. Arguably, the role of culture is more significant today than in previous times. According to Grupp (2003) individual fears are cultivated through the media and less and less an outcome of direct experience. 'Fear is decreasingly experienced first-hand and increasingly experienced on a discursive and abstract level' she concludes and she suggestively notes that 'there has been a general shift from a fearsome life towards a life with fearsome media'. (Grupp, 2003: 43). This point is echoed by Altheide who claims that 'popular culture has been the key element in promoting the discourse of fear'. (Altheide, 2002: 177). This trend appears to be understood by Osama bin Laden who in an interview in October 2001 asked 'why is the Western media establishment so anti-humane' and replied 'because 'it implants fear and helplessness in the psyche of the people of Europe and the United States'¹. According to an important contribution by the legal theorist Christopher Guzelian it is this indirect dimension of fear that represents the distinctive feature of contemporary fear culture. He believes that 'most fears in America's electronic age' are the results of 'risk information (whether correct or false) that is communicated to society'. He concludes that it is '*risk communication*, not personal experience' which 'causes most fear these days'. (Guzelian, 2004: 712 & 767).

The influence of the discourse of fear is not a direct outcome of the power of the media. The dynamic of individuation has encouraged fear to be experienced in a fragmented and atomised form. That is why fear is rarely experienced as a form of collective insecurity

along the lines of previous generations. This development is well captured by Elin, who argues that the fear that we sense today is no longer the fear of “dangerous classes” or vice versa’ and that fear has ‘come home’ and become privatized. (Elin, 1999: 149). The sensibility of fear is internalised in an isolated form as a fear of crime or as a banal fear orientation towards life what Hubbard (2003) characterizes as ‘ambient fear’. He notes that this is ‘fear that requires us to vigilantly monitor every banal minutia of our lives’ since ‘even mundane acts are now viewed as inherently risky and dangerous’. (Hubbard, 2003: 72). Outwardly it is the flourishing of low grade fears and risks that captures the imagination. But the real significance of this development is highly personalised even customised way that fear is experienced. The privatization of fear encourages an inward orientation towards the self. People interviewed about the personal risks they faced tended to represent ‘crisis, fears and anxieties as self-produced and individual problems, the products of “personal biography”’. (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003: 38).

Fear as a problem in its own right

One of the interesting dimension of contemporary culture is the pervasive character of the discourse of fear. Fear is frequently represented as a defining cultural mood that dominates society. Of course the institutionalisation of a discourse of fear through the issuing of health warnings, risk management or media alerts should not be interpreted as proof that the quantity of fears has increased. It possibly has. Nor can we conclude on the basis of existing evidence that people fear more intensely than in the past. The prominent role assumed by the narrative of fear merely indicates that it serves as a frame through which we interpret a variety of experiences. It also suggests that fear works as a problem in its own right. Through its association with the narrative of risk, fear has become objectified. Hunt has noted that ‘risk discourse transposes anxieties into an objectivist problematic’. (Hunt, 2003: 174). As a result, increasingly fear is perceived as an autonomous problem. Consequently ‘fear becomes a discourse’ which ‘expands beyond a specific referent and is used instead as a more general orientation’. (Grupp, 2003: 18).

One of the distinguishing features of fear today is that it appears to have an independent existence. In this respect it resembles the way in which social anxiety was conceptualised in the forties and fifties. (May, 1950) But whereas anxiety was represented as a diffuse intangible condition fear exists in an objectified form as a clearly identifiable social problem. Fear rather than what it responds to is a distinct problem of our times. It is frequently cited as a problem that exists in its own right disassociated from any specific object. Classically societies associate fear with a clearly formulated threat, the fear of death, the fear of a specific enemy or the fear of hunger. In such formulations, the threat was defined as the object of such fears. The problem was death, illness or hunger. Today we frequently represent the act of fearing as a threat itself. A striking illustration of this development is the fear of crime. Today, it is conceptualised as a serious problem that is to some extent distinct from acts of crime. As Garland (2001) observes; ‘fear of crime has come to be regarded as a problem in and of itself, quite distinct from actual crime and victimization, and distinctive policies have been developed that aim to reduce fear levels,

rather than reduce crime'. (Garland 2001:10). Indeed it seems that the fear of crime is 'now recognized as a more widespread problem than crime itself'. (Bannister & Fyfe, 2001: 808).

It is far from clear what is measured when statistics point to an increase or decrease of the fear of crime. As Hale (1996) suggests, what is measured is not so much the fear of crime but 'some other attribute which might be better characterized as "insecurity with modern living", "quality of life", "perception of disorder" or "urban unease".' (Hale, 1996: 84). However through quantifying a cultural mood, the fear of crime becomes objectified and can acquire a force of its own. Its objectification may turn it into a 'fact of life' that legitimates if not encourages the fear response.

Frequently, public anxiety and concern are represented as a material factor that can have a decisive impact on people's health. Contemporary medical culture contends that stress and fear is likely to increase the risk of heart disease, cancer and chronic lung disease. (Siegel: 2005). In the UK the conclusion of an enquiry held into alleged health effects from cell phones, is now regarded as a model for how to respond to contemporary health fears – particularly related to environmental health. The Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones (IEGMP) set up 'to keep ahead of public anxiety' concluded that there was no known health threat posed by mobile telephony. At the same time, the report stated that anxieties created by the simple presence of mobile phone masts need to be taken seriously since public fear by itself could lead to ill health. (Furedi 2003: 4). There is always a potential for people's health anxiety to turn into a major problem. The medical sociologist, Phil Strong writes of an 'epidemic of suspicion' that can cause serious public health problems (Strong 1990: 253). However it is only recently that fear is represented as an autonomous cause of illness.

With the autonomisation of fear the issue is not simply its cause but the potential negative consequences of this emotion. This perspective often encourages the strategy of managing feelings of fear rather than source of the problem. If people feel that their health is at risk than this fear is often seen as a risk to people's well being (Furedi 2004:137). The legal system in the US and the UK has also internalised this trend and there is a discernible tendency on the part of courts to compensate fear, even in the absence of a perceptible physical threat. As Guzelian, noted, in the past 'fright' i.e. a reaction to an actual event was compensated whereas now the fear that something negative would happen is also seen as grounds for making a claim (Guzelian, 2004 : 771).

The autonomisation of fear is associated with a growing tendency to conceptualise risk as an independent variable. Risk communication is informed by a perspective that believes that 'fear itself is a risk and must be part of risk-management policy making'. (Gray & Ropeik, 2002: 106). The transformation of fear into a risk is paralleled by the tendency to represent risk as a negative experience. Terms like a 'good risk' enjoy little cultural affirmation. Even the representation of risk as neutral appears inconsistent with the temper of our time. Instead risk is associated with negative outcomes that people are

expected to fear. Through risk management the performance of fear is both institutionalised and culturally encouraged.

The unstable free-floating and raw character of fear

The volatility of the discourse of fear is conceptualised by Parkin as a shift from a concept of fear that 'encompassed that of respect' to what he calls 'raw fear'. The former is described as an 'institutionally controlled fear' whereas 'raw fear' has more of a free-floating and unpredictable character. (Parkin 1986: 158&159) Bourke claims that this shift towards more 'nebulous anxiety states' is due to the decline of the tangible threats to corporeal existence that are occasioned by war. Bourke (2005: 293). However as noted previously, it is likely that it is the privatisation of fear that endows it with an arbitrary and fluid dimension.

The unpredictable character of fear points to its free-floating and dynamic character. Its volatility is enhanced by its unstable and unfocused trajectory. 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 paedophile' 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 (Filler 2003: 345) This arbitrary association of terrorism and paedophilia can have the effect of amplifying the fear of both. In the same way constant claims that this or that hurricane, flood and other natural disasters are symptoms of global warming has the effect of altering perceptions and fears of such events.

Fear today has a free-floating dynamic and can attach itself to wide variety phenomena. The fear of terrorism illustrates this trend. Since September 11th, this fear floats into an ever-expanding territory. Deliberations on this subject have acquired a phantasy-like character. 'Corporations must re-examine their definition of risk and take seriously the possibility of scenarios that only science fiction writers could have imagined possible one year ago' argues a leading economist. (Hale 2002) Fear floats into new territory because since 9/11 normal hazards can be turned into exceptional threats by associating them with the action of terrorists. As a result we do not simply worry about the hazard posed by a nuclear power station we also fear that it may turn into a terrorist target. The fact that an ever-expanding phenomenon can be perceived as a target is less an outcome of an increase in the capabilities of terrorists than in the growth of competitive claims making about what to fear.

The free-floating dynamic of fear is promoted by a culture that communicates hesitancy and anxiety towards uncertainty and continually anticipates the worse possible outcome. The culture which has been described as the culture of fear (Furedi 1997, Glassner 1999) or as precautionary culture (Pieterman 2001) encourages society to approach human experience as a potential risk to our safety. Consequently every conceivable experience has been transformed into a risk to be managed. One leading criminologist, David

Garland writes of the ‘Rise of Risk’ – the explosion in the growth of risk discourse and risk literature. He notes that little connects this literature other than the use of the word risk. (Garland 2003: 52). However, the very fact that risk is used to frame a variety of otherwise unconnected experiences reflects a taken-for-granted mood of uncertainty towards human experience. In contemporary society little can be taken-for-granted other than an apprehensive response towards uncertainty. Arguably fear like risk has become a taken-for granted idiom, even a cultural affectation for expressing confusion and uncertainty. The French social theorist Francois Ewald believes that the ascendancy of this precautionary sensibility is underwritten by a cultural mood that assumes the uncertainty of causality between action and effect. This sensibility endows fear with a privileged status. Ewald suggests that the institutionalisation of precaution ‘invites one to consider the worst hypothesis (defined as the “serious and irreversible” consequence) in any business decision’. The tendency to engage with uncertainty through the prism of fear and therefore anticipate the worst possible outcome can be understood as a **crisis of causality**. Riezler in his early attempt to develop a psychology of fear draws attention to the significant influence of the prevailing system of causality on people’s response to threats. ‘They have been taken for granted – and now they are threatened’ is how he describes as situation where “causes” are hopelessly entangled’. (Riezler, 1944: 497). The question of causation is inextricably bound up with the way communities attempt to make sense of acts of misfortune. The way people interpret such events – an accident or a catastrophe – is processed through the prevailing system of meaning. Questions like ‘was it God’ or ‘was it nature’ or ‘was it an act of human error’ have important implications in how we understand acts of misfortune. Confusion about causation encourages speculation, rumours and mistrust. As a result events often appear as incomprehensible and beyond human control.

Identity of vulnerability

‘Whom and what we fear, and how we express and act upon our fearing, is in some quite important sense as, Durkheim long ago realized, constitutive of who we are’. (Sparks, Girling & Loader, 2001; 885). That is why the autonomisation of fear has important implication for the constitution of identity. The consciousness of being subjected to threats that possess an independent existence is clearly formulated through the recently constructed concept of being *at risk*. The emergence of the ‘at risk’ concept ruptures the traditional relationship between individual action and the probability of some hazard. (Furedi 2002). To be at risk is no longer only about what you do or the probability of some hazard impacting on your life – it is also about who you are. It becomes a fixed attribute of the individual, like the size of a person’s feet or hands. When public officials categorise groups of people who are at risk they can literally visualise the objects of their labelling. At the same time, the perception of being at risk encourages the emergence of a fearful subjectivity. According to Beck ‘the movement set in motion by the risk society... is expressed in the statement **I am afraid!**’ He adds that therefore the ‘**commonality of anxiety** takes the place of the **commonality of need**’. (Beck, 1992: 49). This sensibility suggests that fear has become an identity endowing experience.

To be at risk assigns to the person a passive and dependent role. Increasingly, someone defined as being at risk is seen to exist in a permanent condition of vulnerability. The belief that people exist in a state of vulnerability informs the way that we are expected to make sense of the threats we face. 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, make choices and possess the emotional resources to deal with adversity. The term vulnerability is habitually used as if it is a permanent feature of a person's biography. It is presented and experienced as a natural state of being that shapes human response. It is a label that describes entire groups in society. That is why it has become common to use the recently constructed concept of **vulnerable groups**.

Through the paradigm of vulnerability, the sense of fear is cultivated as part of the normal state of being. The converse of this deflation of the status of human subjectivity is the inflation of the threat that external circumstances represent to the integrity of the individual self. The vulnerability and impotence of the individual stands in sharp contrast to the formidable powers attributed to the everyday challenges that people confront. Through the constant amplification of the risks facing humanity – pollution, global warming, catastrophic flue epidemic, weapons of mass destruction, large variety of health scares – even the limited exercise of individual choice appears to be restricted by the harsh regime of uncertainty. The identity of vulnerability is the flip side of the autonomisation of fear.

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¹ Bruce B. Lawrence 'In Bin Laden's Words', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*; 4 November 2005.