

POLITICS WITHOUT FEAR IS A UTOPIA

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A type of politics not based on fear may be desirable, but in a world full of threats – real as well as imaginary – politics without fear is simply a utopian ideal. **The best that can be hoped for is that fear not be mixed too closely with hatred.** But this too is a remote prospect.

Mass fear can have profound effects. As an example, the sudden increase in economic insecurity following the financial crisis is fuelling a political upheaval in many European countries. In Ireland, the fate of the bail-out will depend on the choices of one or two independent parliamentarians, while Sinn Fein is making a political comeback that leaves any budgetary set-

tlement more problematic. In Hungary and some other post-communist European countries, the financial collapse is producing an unsteady oscillation between neo-liberal austerity and xenophobic attack on minorities. **Fear is driving European politics to an increasing degree, and since current problems are not soluble within existing European structures this is likely to be the case for the foreseeable future.** A similar pattern can be observed in the US, where the Tea Party movement has emerged as a grass-roots reaction to intractable economic difficulties. Fear-driven populist movements are undermining weak governments, with unpredictable consequences.

Democracies are as affected by the politics of mass fear as totalitarian and authoritarian states. Fear of terrorism is used by politicians to advance their goals in all countries. The situation is complex, since terrorism is a genuine threat: some fear is quite often rational in this context, but it can be irrationally magnified as it is promulgated through 24-hour media outlets. It is likely that new fears will emerge as the infrastructure of modern society becomes more vulnerable. For example, **evolving strategies of cyber-warfare are likely to evoke a fearful response in both democratic and authoritarian states. The result may be a process of convergence** in which democratic states acquire some of the features associated with authoritarian regimes, such as detention without trial.

itics, it can only be managed with varying degrees of success and intelligence. It may be rational, like a fear of terrorism; but rational fears can also be exploited for political purposes. Other rational fears, such as a fear of global warming, may at present be too weak to be politically exploitable, but as climate change accelerates the situation will change, and **states are likely to resort to unilateral projects of geo-engineering while blaming other states for the worsening environmental situation.** Irrational fears may produce greater social cohesion for a time, but they ultimately do so at the cost of exacerbating any underlying problems.

Electronic pandemics that infect the infrastructure of industrial societies are likely to be a major source of fear in the future, whether spontaneously generated as flaws in the system, or as the result of cyberwar operations. Intensifying competition for vital commodities, such as oil, minerals, arable land, fresh water, etc. will generate new resource wars, with governments using a fear of foreigners to legitimize the resulting state of chronic conflict. Looking further ahead, **twenty or thirty years from now, it is likely that flows of environmental refugees from regions affected by climate change will evoke further fears that will yet again enable governments to extend their powers of surveillance.** A succession of environmental catastrophes could also trigger the growth of apocalyptic cults, some of which may turn to

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Apart from being a tool, fear can also be one of the most profitable political commodities, a fact that is unlikely to change.

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terrorism, as observed with survivalist movements in the US as well as the Aum cult in Japan. ■

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