

# PRIVATE ACTORS ARE MORE FRIGHTFUL THAN THE STATE

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Corey Robin

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POSITION



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**RJ** *Do mass fears determine our political, economic and social life? Can our culture be called 'a culture of fear'?*

I think we can call it 'a culture of fear'. The paradox of our culture of fear is that **the advances in security, far from diminishing fear, tend to have a way of enhancing our fear.** Just to provide an example, I don't know what the situation is like in Russia, but here in the United States, we have elaborate security measures when we board an airplane, and recently there was a big controversy

because these procedures have become even more invasive of one's person. What is interesting about these procedures is that, far from making people feel more comfortable and feel secure, they actually make people feel more apprehensive and insecure. And I think, as I have said, this is a paradox that we constantly face in that, often times, the more measures we take to alleviate the real threats, the more insecure we actually feel. For instance, the best example of this is that, during the 1990s, the violent crime rate in the United States, particularly homicides, seriously declined. And, far from making people feel calmer and more secure, what we observed is that these measures only increases fear in a specific part of the population.

**RJ** *Fear is a biological phenomenon. When does the biological fear become a political fear?*

The biological fear is transformed into a political fear when fear comes to occupy part of the political agenda, when it becomes a major subject of political deliberation and debate, and when it becomes a major item of public policy. And that instantly changes simple biological fears to be

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subject of all kinds of political calculations and political discussions. Several things happen during this transformation. **The first** is that only certain fears, certain biological fears, are focused on by political elites and economic elites. For instance, economic fears often get

short shrift in this country, whereas fears around terrorism seem to get more attention. Because of that, it transforms the individual experience of fear, making it into a political fear. **The second thing** is the object of fear, the thing that is threatening or frightening - let's say a terrorist or a criminal. Whatever it may be, it is interpreted by political and cultural elites, who then give it a code, assign some meaning to it, and assign a cause to it. Why does terrorism happen in the first place? And those interpretations shape our experience of fear. Then people assume that the reason why people are terrorists, for instance, is because they hate the US for its freedom or something to that effect. This interpretation shapes how we experience fear. **The last thing that happens** is the measures that the political elites take in response to this fear. Usually they take more limited, prudent measures. I think all of that transforms fear from a simple biological experience to make it into something political.

**RJ** *It is often said that fear is a feature of a totalitarian state. What is the correlation between fear and democracy?*

I want to limit my answer to talking about American democracy, because liberal democracy in America has a couple of particular features.

One is that there are strong limitations that are put on the state. What I have found in my research is

that in the United States, historically, in American democracy the biggest source of intimidating political fear has come not from the state so much as it has come from private actors. And this tendency dates back to the days of slavery. Slavery is really the most comprehensive system of political intimidation and fear that one can have, at least in this country, and slavery thrived on the limitations that were put on the national state.

And it was only when the national state was empowered to eliminate these private forms of power that this kind of intimidation was finally able to subside. We can also see this today in the American workplace, where private employers have a tremendous amount of power, coercive power that they wield over their employees, which is unregulated and untouched by the federal government.



Dewey and the workers' movement. And what these movements have been about, and these individuals who have led these movements have written about them, was that the federal government used that power to bring to heel

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Thus, when you ask me what the relationship is between democracy and fear, at least in the American context, the relationship is that we have created an elaborate set of checks on the exercise of governmental power, particularly central government power. However, far from diminishing fear, those checks have allowed private actors, private elites, tremendous sway over the personal lives of ordinary, everyday citizens.

*RJ* Does the American liberal tradition show any tendencies capable of overcoming these negative tendencies?

There is a different kind of liberalism in the United States. It does not really have a name for it, but I associate it with figures like Martin Luther King and Frederick Douglass, with the feminist movement, with Eugene Debs, John

the power of private elites, whether they are in the workplace, in the family, or in religious institutions. In other words, **rather than limiting government power, today I think the great path that we have, as liberals, is to enhance government power** so that the government can really eliminate that rampant fear that exists in the private sector.

*RJ* If we consider President Obama, do you think that he moves in this direction?

I do not know what is in his heart of hearts, so I do not want to speculate about his own personal beliefs and intentions. From my perspective, the record of his administration has been very disappointing in this regard. So, for instance, when it comes to labour unions, with a couple of exceptions, he really has not taken on the fundamental issues that

are of concern today, towards really eliminating the sort of private autocracy in the work place or towards making it easier for labour unions to organise them. I think that this is a fundamental issue today. As well, there is a piece of legislation that has been sitting in Congress for quite some time. Obama has not really put his leverage behind, and this is not just a failure of one piece of legislation - it represents a whole failure in terms of political vision and a failure to understand that, if you want to create a free society, the federal government is really the preeminent, historically appropriate instrument for doing that. **Rather than apologising for the exercise of government power, Obama really ought to be making the case forthrightly that the government is not an enemy of freedom, but rather that the government is the instrument of freedom.**

*RJ* You are talking about internal threats and related fears, but there are also external threats. For example, the fear of terrorism results in the government gaining more power, and some experts believe that it is this gaining more power that is a threat to freedom. What do you think about this?

Yes, this is true, and I don't want to overlook that, but often times in the United States, you see that what happens is that it is not the government per se that gained power; it is often times the private sector that gains power. So, for instance, you know who is performing all the surveillance activities that you see happening? It is all private companies that are doing this kind of thing and obtaining all kinds of private contracts, etc. And who tends to bear the brunt of it is one particular group of citizens. Again, I don't want to diminish that argument, as I think there is some truth to it, but that's an argument not against government per se. Rather, it is an argument about what is the appropriate fear or threat that needs to be dealt with

and how exactly it should be dealt with. I think that is the conversation we need to have.

*RJ* So, you still believe that it is the state that must take action and that we should not be afraid of the state?

I think we should certainly be sceptical and critical of the state, as we should be of any other institution that has power over it. **I just think that, considering the balance today,**

I think that's true and that this has probably always been the case. I don't think there is anything particularly different about that today. But yes, I think there can be no doubt about it that fear definitely sells. Again, if you actually look at all the private contractors that are involved in the terrorism-security business, you will see that it is a booming industry, so I don't doubt that idea at all.

fearful. And it is that underlying unity of ideas that brings together a society. I don't think it is simple fear per se.

*RJ* So, fear is a bad factor in terms of uniting a nation?

The matter is that I just don't think a fear is what actually unites a nation. I think that has always been the position of certain intellectuals and political leaders to believe that fear can unite them, but the record shows that this is just not the case.

I think society is always united by ideas. It is a certain idea that brings a given society together, and it is that idea that then makes this society fear certain things rather than other things. So, for instance, let's look at the Tea Party today - what is it that animates the Tea Party? Well, they have a common fear of government, they have a fear of outsiders, they have a fear of Muslims, and they have a fear of terrorists. However, that is not what unites them; it is their underlying ideology about what America ought to be that unites them and makes them fear certain things rather than fearing other sorts of things. ■

*Corey Robin was speaking with Dmitry Uzlaner and Alexander Pavlov*

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**the real threat is not the state per se; it is very much the private sector.** If you ask ordinary people what the source of coercion is in their life, it is actually not the state at all. It is their employer or abuse in relation to their spouse - it is private actors who are overwhelmingly the source of great intimidation for individuals.

*RJ* Does political fear have any positive functions?

I am always weary about that. There has always been an argument that somehow political fear can be a unifying force and that it can bring society to deal with problems that it did not previously deal with before. However, I tend to think that those arguments are overblown. **It is not simple fear that brings a society together; it is an underlying vision of what matters to that society - what is good, what is worthwhile, what is worth pursuing.** That is what makes certain things fearful and others not

*RJ* One of the themes explored today is fear as a commodity. So, would you agree with the statement that fear today has become one of the best political commodities? Mass media sells fear, political parties sell fear, so can we say that fear is a good commodity.

## BEHIND THE WALL OF FEAR THERE IS THE PLEASURE FROM NEGATIVITY



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Exclusively for RJ

If you ask me about the political function of fear (or terror, panic, or anxiety — there are many synonyms that apply here) in the modern world, as a political philosopher, I would say the following: terror, as a political affect, is especially endemic in democratic societies. **Terror is ultimately no more than a search in vain for a sovereign, a paroxysm of negativity that assumes a 'sovereign place' in democracies.** Claude Lefort wrote about this in relation to the French Revolution.

In the present day, the political fear in the form of the free-floating anxiety and angst promulgated in the mass media is the only way for our deteriorating societies to *negatively* prevail over solidarity, and to run in imagination past a whole society, a whole city. It is not the unknown terrorist here that is important, but contact with this whole that matters. In this sense, the terror and fear that are mongering in democratic mass media are, on the one hand, a natural way to justify the institutionalisation of society. However, on the other hand, this is no more than a fear of fear itself — in other words, the portrayal of democratic negativity as being dangerous and reprehensible forms of repression.

However, **behind the wall of fear, we should also learn to see the pleasure that exists from negativity.** But for some reason, you (editor's note: the *Russian Journal*) are only asking questions about fear and not about pleasure. Is it due the desire to foment it, get rid of it, or share it with others? ■