

FEAR AS A CURRENCY OF DEMOCRACIES

Alexander Cockburn



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RJ *Has fear become one of the most profitable commodities on the political market? Who is trading in fear? Is it possible or necessary to eliminate this commodity?*

Certainly it is one of the ‘best’ – i.e. most effective – commodities in the political market place. All governments trade in this currency to a greater or lesser extent, and will no doubt continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

RJ *Do you think that mass fear is the driving force behind the political, economic, and social life of modern societies?*

The fear of scarcity is instilled in mankind and to a greater or lesser degree it ultimately determines the course of economic, social, and political life.

Today, so far as the United States is concerned, fear – with its cognates such as anger and prejudice

– is the dominant political emotion. **Half a century ago, the left was writing optimistic recipes for social change. Today, young people live in a stew of fear, most of which are entirely irrational and unscientific.** The most obvious one is the entirely speculative hypothesis concerning human-caused global warming. There seems to be no end to the promulgation of this fear. I live on a remote coastline in northern California. The road along the edge of the sea is now dotted with signs – erected at considerable public expense – alerting drivers to the fact that they are driving in an area where tsunamis – extremely rare tidal waves – *might* occur.

The press has always dealt in the currency of fear, right back to its origins as a mass medium in the late nineteenth century. Today, the press – a waning force because of the internet – tries to keep readers loyal with a constant diet of hysteria about global warming, flu epidemics, runaway inflation of the currency, the Muslim threat to western civilization, the kidnapping of their children by molesters and Satanists, etc. **The internet then reiterates these fears with dizzying speed.**

RJ *A life spent in fear has generally been considered the lot of those in authoritarian societies. Is it true that people in democracies fear less? What is the correlation between fear and democracy?*

Fear is as much a part of the arsenal of democratic governments as it is of totalitarian or authoritarian ones. The difference comes in the way the fear is instilled and maintained

Of course it depends on the level of repression in a totalitarian state and hence the degree of actual terror among the repressed. But

assuming a relatively tranquil, mild, authoritarian state, say the **Brezhnev period in the former Soviet Union, the bulk of the population might well experience less fear than those in a formally democratic society** where coercion is exercised not by the fear of prison or exile to a labor camp but by the manipulation of fear – of economic depression, of crime, of nuclear attack, of epidemics, etc. **Fear is as much a part of the arsenal of democratic governments as it is of totalitarian or authoritarian ones. The difference comes in the way the fear is instilled and maintained.**

RJ *Have modern mass fears transformed the nature of democracy (e.g. fear of terrorism, fear of financial collapse, fear of immigrants)? If so, in what ways?*

The greater the fear, and the more forcefully it is fostered and exploited, the swifter the erosion of substantive rights in a democratic society. This can be easily verified by studying the growth of ‘emergency laws’ and ‘statutes’ in, for example, Great Britain or the United States. The hysteria over the rise of communism after 1917 was fanned by both governments, and it duly produced the suspension – partial or total – of civil liberties such as the freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, habeas corpus, right to a speedy trial, ability to confront one’s

accusers, etc. Wars are another common factor that lead to an onslaught on civil liberties – particularly on labor rights, such as the right to strike.

The same process has occurred in the UK and the US over the past thirty years, and has accelerated in the last fifteen years. The Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act signed into law by President Clinton was part one of the Patriot Act, which was signed into law by President Bush following the attacks of September 11, 2001. These two sets of laws certainly changed the nature of US democracy for the worse.

RJ *Could fear ever prevent or hinder the process of globalization in a state or across a society? Or could fear, on the contrary, serve as a unifying force?*

There are collective fears of course, shared by all of humanity and traceable to our very distant past, but in modern times fear is usually divisive, in part because states justify themselves to their citizens by invoking their zeal to beat off threats to ‘national security.’ In the period roughly from 1945 to 1975, the United Nations was still regarded as the custodian of man’s collective hopes for a better world. These were expressed in the early 1970s in the plans for a New World Economic Order. But the rise of neoliberalism – embodied by Thatcher in the UK, and Jimmy Carter and then Ronald Reagan in the US – saw the beginning of the decline of the UN in public expectation as an agency, often sadly compromised of course, for collective world betterment.

In the United States today, fear easily trumps all constructive engagement and is the weapon of choice in any political debate. Witness the virtual impossibility of concluding even the most modest of treaties on arms control.

RJ *What sort of mass fears are most likely to define the next ten years?*

Fears – often gravely exaggerated – about limited resources in energy, food, and water will continue to flourish. In the West, and particularly in the US, Malthusianism – the fear of over-breeding poor people – has become the *sotto voce* ideology of the rich. **The Left has somehow lost the ability to express persuasively a positive vision for the people.** As a result, this political opportunity is being exploited by the right, albeit in such bizarre mutations as the Tea Party.

If people fear that their rights are being stolen from them and combine politically to resist, then of course such fears could have a positive function. ■

Alexander Cockburn was speaking with Yulia Nesterova

MENTAL VIRUSES IN THE POLITICAL SPHERE



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All fears stem from problems, challenges that should be met with a response. **Some social problems are only transient. But others are really terrifying,** and the feelings related to them are called fear. How can we distinguish a problem which scares, tortures and disturbs from one that, on the contrary, forces people to pull together, to make decisions, to do something, or that motivates some sort of activity? The nature of these problems is the same, only the emotions associated with them differ. You know, there may be different reactions to one and the same problem. Some people grow fearful of walking on dark sidewalk while others go buy a gun.

We cannot say that there is someone who stands behind one’s fears. After all, it is a sort of mosaic that tends to be very dynamic. The problem that seemed to be acute one month ago is already forgotten today. However, there is an imperative of like-mindedness in a totalitarian society and this effectively restrains diversity. In societies where there are no brakes for such dynamics, the emergence of a factor that can act across the board is very unlikely. These could only be natural factors or calamities when millions of people have virtually the same thoughts. This kind of situation occurred on September 11, 2001. In one minute, the majority of the world’s population suddenly

became horror-stricken because of what they saw thanks to global TV networks.

In a mosaic-like society, fears start to resemble an epidemic. Viruses appear and spread out, but they should otherwise be suppressed by the immune system. And what is an immune system? Antibodies that eat away at a virus. This period is usually called a disease. And viruses expelled from the body infect other people. You sneeze and someone else gets sick. The same happens to mental viruses, ‘the memes’. **You listen to the news but you do not hear what they are saying: you’ve got ‘bananas in your ears’.** **These are the antibodies that protect you from news** that is of no interest to you. In the social realm, while people do not spread such viruses by coughing, they do so by communicating, recalling all of their cases to each other and telling their fears, etc. And sometimes it thrills us so much that all good thoughts abandon us and we give in to fear. But if you have a good education, you have already been told, for example, that you should not be afraid of the decline of the dollar or the ruble, for instance. Intelligence is just an analogue of the immune system. One needs to understand, and one needs to be able to reason. A wild human being is scared of virtually everything around him. ■