

Fear and Institutions*

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Fear is a primal instinct; it allowed the early humans, indeed all species to adapt, evolve, and survive. When humans moved into settled communities with more advanced means of production, the nature of fear – much like the nature of social relationships – changed. Once the means of social reproduction were secured, fear became less necessary as a survival instinct and more useful as a heuristic device. Fear evolved.

Fear cannot be characterized as an essentially socially constructed phenomenon, or as the self-contained, individualized response to internalized traumas. The growth and nature of fear must be studied as a process that develops under its own inertia, feeding off its antecedent past, and as a phenomenon that is shaped by and in turn shapes its institutional setting. Fear should be understood as both structurally determined and socially transformative. This research seeks to examine fear, specifically as it relates to neoliberalism and institutions.

The Nature of Fear

In order for the individual to exercise agency, she must be self-reflexive, and part of reflexive thought is the experience of fear¹. In the same way that agency is interactively constructed by the individual and her institutional context, so is fear. Not only is there an instinctual element to fear - as demonstrated in the physiological response of the body - there is also a dimension to fear that is shaped by the interactivity between structure and agent (Bourke, 2003). The greater the agency the individual feels the more anxious she potentially feels in return (Bourke 2005). It is important to recognize that there is a difference between the anxieties that an individual may singularly possess that are kept private, and the anxieties individuals share across a particular community. The latter shared social anxieties become part of the social structure and the social repository of knowledge (Jackson and Everts 2010).

The emotion of fear is an interactive negotiation that gives fear its form and imbues it with meaning. Fear and structure are thus interactive, both evolving independently and interactively (Bourke 2003, 2005). The more community specific and the more superficial the social anxiety, the less likely the anxiety producing event is to provoke institutional change. The reverse is also true: the more wide-spread and temporally resistant the social anxiety, the more likely institutional change – for instance, health protocols or waste infrastructure – will take place (Jackson and Everts 2010).

Fear is given expression and articulation through social and cultural practice. If the role of culture is to provide a coherent and consistent world view, then when it is threatened, all the security previously afforded by that cultural worldview is threatened, thus heightening anxieties (McBride 2011). When the object of an anxiety-inducing event is easy to locate, its elimination often results in the elimination of the anxiety (ex: avian flu). When the object of the anxiety-inducing event cannot be easily located or eliminated (ex: terrorist threats),

individuals must cope with constant anxiety. In contending with social anxieties, institutions adapt and evolve as part of the coping process (Jackson and Everts 2010).

As science and technology are agents of change, the progression of science and technology represent sources of anxieties. Framed in this way, we can extend the Veblenian dichotomy beyond the institutional-ceremonial drag on progress and dig deeper into analyzing the anxieties provoked by institutional change. In addition to the nature of the anxiety, the manner in which communities react to social anxieties determines the course of social action. While some may catalyze technological change, pushing it forward even faster, other social anxieties may spark a reactionary response, with communities drawing on tradition and perhaps slowing the pace of social and technological change (Jackson and Everts 2010).

At the core of modern fear lie two essential and related causes: ontological insecurity and existential anxiety. Death might be the great equalizer, but when we face it and under what circumstances, is most decidedly not. This is especially true on a very basic level in areas where health care is not adequately funded and accessible to all; indeed, some of us are more ontologically secured than others. To this end, ontological security helps to forestall the pervasiveness in the foreground of thought of existential anxiety and as such, those who are more ontologically secure, that is, more successful within the neoliberal project, are better equipped to push into the background or to cover up the constant threat of nothingness or death and therefore are able to ameliorate existential anxiety. The less ontologically secure must work much harder to push existential anxiety into latency.

The Devil You Know

Nativist reaction

During periods of heightened uncertainty and anxiety, individuals gravitate toward philosophically conservative, right-wing² ideals which provide concrete answers to

unanswerable questions and which also provide boundaries for order, structure, and hierarchy that relieve the individual from having to process too much information and make too many decisions in an uncertain environment (Jost and Hunyady 2005). Ideologies and belief systems are the outcome of individuals wrestling with existential concerns; the sharper the existential concerns, as occurs in times of acute crisis, the more individuals seek existential reassurance from their constructed belief systems. It is when uncertainty pervades and further crisis looms that conservative ideologies find stronger adherents as well as new recruits (Salzman 2008).

The anxieties of the individual may remain latent, especially in times of relative security and prosperity, but the anxieties are nevertheless there. So too then is the possibility of a renewed commitment and allegiance to institutions that offer conservative ideals ever present, ready to rise in the face of uncertainty. Historically, events that are traumatic at the national level tend to heighten the appeal of conservative leaders. Hitler's rise from the cauldron of the Great Depression was less the outcome of charismatic trickery, and more the result of the sharp ontological and existential crises faced by the people in the throes of the worst crisis of capitalism to date (Jost 2006). As Hayek pointed out, in times of heightened uncertainty or threat, individuals become more willing to accept leadership that proposes strict rules and deep social sanctions for violation of those rules (1944).

As individuals become disembedded from their old social structures as a consequence of the intensification of the neoliberal project, insecurity compels them to create social moorings and continuity through a re-imagination of those social structures to which they plead greater allegiance and fidelity than they otherwise would have done absent the systemic changes. As the individual becomes more socially disconnected, she can become more attached to an imagined past, more deeply rooted in that imagined tradition, and less tolerant of deviations from it (Kinnvall 2004). The dismantling of tradition and the uprooting

of social ties provokes nativist reactions manifest in religious fundamentalism as well as in a resurgence of right-wing, neo-fascist organizations, which in turn produce well-defined "others." These reactions promise social continuity and security by giving meaning, purpose, and self-esteem to the individual (Salzman 2008).

System justification theory

Within the field of social psychology, the theory of system justification attempts to uncover why individuals defend the status quo of a system, even when the status quo does not act in the individual's best interest. One of the most powerful explanations uncovered through empirical research on the matter is that of "situational antecedents" (Jost and Hunyady 2005: 260): an individual's personal set of ideologies endows her/him with a set of mental models which enables the individual to legitimize the institutional context in which s/he sits (Jost et al. 2003).

System justification theory is not context dependent, but rather relies on the psychological processes individuals employ to cope with uncertainty and anxiety. Researchers found that individuals from Western capitalist countries and individuals from Eastern Bloc, formerly command planned economies both engaged in system justification despite the different systems they were respectively defending. It seems to be a human compulsion to defend the present system when faced with uncertainty and anxiety regardless of what that current system might be. It is truly a case of 'the devil you know' (Jost and Hunyady 2005).

As part of the system justification process, individuals legitimize their surrounding institutional context by rationalizing the status quo. Experiments also show that individuals are more willing to engage in the stereotyping of others in the justification of a system that sustains inequality as a means of justifying the hierarchy. Additionally, and regardless of the circumstances, disadvantaged groups continually perceived the more advantaged in a

favorable light - even when a sub-section of the advantaged might be blamed for the current anxiety and uncertainty of the disadvantaged, such as with the case of questionable business practices in the corporate and banking sector (Jost and Hunyady 2005).

Since individuals who justify the market system are unrealistically optimistic about their future and believe they have control over market outcomes, when failure does strike, the blow stirs more anxiety than might otherwise emerge. The heightened levels of anxiety that result from the unexpected losses lead individuals not to blame the system, but to place blame elsewhere, such as on other individuals who likewise have failed (Jost et al. 2003). That with which we find fault in others spotlights what we do not like about ourselves. Since that fear or hatred of others is at least partially rooted in self-loathing, it becomes all the more attractive to be able to identify an 'other' on whom we may unload those undesired characteristics and focus our outrage (Bourke 2005).

Moral panics

Moral panics demonstrate in rather dramatic fashion, society's limits to the tolerance of non-conformist behavior. Within the literature on moral panics, much attention has been paid to the socio-economic conditions within which the panic catalyzed. Studies found that in all historical cases researched, some systemic unrest existed that was difficult to articulate. This is not to suggest a conspiratorial element, that moral panics are created whole-cloth in order to distract the public and keep them occupied with some specific demon not central to the functioning of the status quo. Rather, it is to suggest that during periods of generalized, difficult to articulate and tacit discomfort the public will seize the opportunity to name an evil and challenge it (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994).

Moral panics are also more likely to emerge during periods of concentrated technological and social change, when the norms of a society soften and material progress inspires changes to tradition or custom. The less rigid and clear the social mores and norms,

the more fertile society is for the emergence of a moral panic (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). The ability to blame another group enables the individual to transfer an unnamed and tacit anxiety into a known and objectified fear. The individual is able to not only find an external locus of blame, but is at the same time, asserting the 'sacredness' of themselves and their choices (Kinnvall 2004).

Moral panics, although relatively recently named, have a storied history. The contextualization of social phenomenon demonstrates that specific social conditions engender specific social responses, so it is true of neoliberalism, that specific moral panics repeatedly emerge, none so obvious in its classism as that of the panic of the wanton welfare queen (Cohen 2002). Fear not only distracts individuals from issues associated with income inequality but when it pays attention to class, it does so by painting the poor as part of the problem (Glassner 2009). If the exception can be promoted to perception of rule, then the moral panic has seized. The outrage over the amoral and corrupt attempts of unwed mothers to cheat the system promotes the case for individual responsibility in general while rallying support for the shrinking of the welfare state specifically (Cohen 2002).

Fear and Neoliberalism

As material progress has amplified, so too has the complexity of capitalism. With greater complexity comes less transparency and individuals slip further out of touch with the totality. This disrupted orientation has grown as capitalism has evolved. As well, mystification deepens as capitalism evolves: what was not known in the material production of objects in the early stages of capitalism has grown into a complete disconnection with the way in which ever more abstract markets for intangible assets operate. One cannot help but feel deeply anxious about residing in a totality s/he doesn't understand or cannot even envision on a practical level (Tally 2010).

As individuals attempt to reconcile their own perceptions with the surrounding social structure, emotions such as fear play a critical part in informing the individual of her place and role. As such, fear is a reflection of the power relationships within a society. This is not to say that fear can be mapped directly on to class; the experience of emotions cannot be used as a sorting mechanism for class (Bourke 2005). Rather, fear guides the individual, for instance in the selection of which social groups she might align herself as well as her position within that social group. Fear is enactive knowledge in that it informs the interaction between the individual agent and her surrounding social structure; it is enactive knowledge that tacitly communicates power relations (Bourke 2003).

Power relations often define the fear that individual's experience. For instance, during the 1940s, children from upper and middle class families could be medically diagnosed as having a fear of school and as such received treatment and educational accommodation for their condition. Working class or poor children who did not attend school regardless of reason were considered truant, and they and their parents lawfully prosecuted. The emotional experience attached to school was thus defined institutionally and varied according to economic status (Bourke 2005). The reaction to social anxieties is context specific and dependent upon other background anxieties already at work, as well as the power structures in place. For example, with the threat of the "swine flu" pandemic, Egypt responded by wiping out the swine stock owned by a religious minority in the area, Asian countries placed an embargo on pork products from North America, and in the US, the lobbying arm of the pork industry campaigned vociferously through the media and through Congress to message to the public that pork was still safe. Here we see three different reactions to the same social anxiety, each of which is the result of the present anxiety context and local institutionalized power structure (Jackson and Everts 2010).

In the US, with help from the media, the public is taught how and what to fear: road rage, adolescent mothers, drugs, internet predators. The stories are hyperbolized and the causes not explored. Following any media scare, an in-depth journalistic analysis is offered to explore the root causes of the tragic event. The root causes often focus on the individual/s responsible for the event, rather than looking at larger systemic or structural issues that might have provoked it. For instance, following reports of the phenomenon of "road rage" were in-depth looks at possible neurological conditions that might have spawned the rage, but no real analysis on the impact of urban sprawl, increased commute times, or the escalation of the housing prices, forcing individuals to move farther from city centers (Glassner 2009). Focusing on the individual rather than structural causes of any incident reinforces the neoliberal narrative of individual responsibility.

The idea that individuals control their own respective fates in the market place coupled with their unrealistic optimism regarding their own future prosperity assists individuals in coping with the uncertainty and anxiety created by the market system. As well, individuals tend not to support policies which would redistribute wealth because of overly optimistic beliefs of their own individual prosperity - a mental model that prevails especially among the less educated (Jost et al. 2003). The perpetual state of crisis avoidance within the neoliberal project breeds insecurity and uncertainty. Moreover, while individuals operate under the perception of complete autonomy and efficacy, the veiled locus of power resides in the deep political reach of the corporate sector.

The impact of institutions on fear is evident by examining the evolution of fear: the fear that inspired manic bank runs in the early part of the twentieth century has been systematically addressed by the government invention of the FDIC (Bourke 2005). Fear also drives crucial allocation decisions in public spending, channeling funds into research and programs that impact statistically fewer individuals or forcing funds into information

campaigns to dispute fearful invectives, such as those surrounding fears of childhood vaccinations (Glassner 2009). Neoconservatives fan the flame of distrust and when possible moral panics about perceived threats from welfare recipients or terrorists in order to obfuscate the failures of the neoliberal state while simultaneously bolstering the neoliberal policies of retrenchment of the welfare state and the strengthening of national defense (Lipsitz 1998)

The impact of the spread of neoliberalism through globalization is felt on two fronts: one, in that the continuity of social relationships erodes; two that the indigenous traditions and customs are steamrolled by the values of the marketplace, and previous ethnographic markers of success are replaced by pecuniary measures (Salzman 2008). Capitalism, in all its forms, but especially in neoliberalism, requires democracy to sustain it. So with the spread of markets came the spread of democracy, undermining former social institutions and traditions, and fueling insecurity and amplifying the isolation already wrought by capitalist structures. Globalization threatens continuity of life on the local level; it invites ontological insecurity as individuals can no longer be certain of work and their places in society to which they've become accustomed. In seeking continuity and security, individuals will reach toward collective identity groups which offer simple rhetoric framed in familiar terms. As the welfare state shrank in both the Western world and in developing countries, identity groups grew to fill the void and to offer continuity and security (Kinnvall 2004).

Concluding Remarks

Individuals cling to the idea that they live in an ordered world that will reward the just and punish the deserving because to live in a world where chaos reigns and the individual bears no control over her fate creates a level of anxiety that is too difficult for the individual to negotiate on her own. The corollary to the belief that the world is a fair and just place is the idea that those who are in some way disadvantaged or have failed within the market

system deserved to do so – it is the fault of the poor that they are poor. The rich, likewise, deserve what they have, regardless of how their wealth might have been acquired (Jost et al. 2003). Accordingly, neoliberalism with its hyper-individualism becomes painted as meritocratic.

The point is not to eradicate fear, or to even attempt to do so; fear inspires and humanizes us – it ignites the imagination for better or worse and can be exhilarating (Bourke 2005). The point is that we should not be afraid to engage honestly and introspectively with our fear so that we don't simply retreat to the comfort of known horrors or sublimate our fears onto others who have no way of assuaging the authentic source of our fear. If we address the systemic issues that create those situations which fuel fear instead of narrowing our scope of examination to the experience of the individual, then as a society we have the potential to treat the causes instead of the symptoms of fear. While there appear to be few limits on the imagining of the potential of technology and material progress, humans are much more limited in the imagining of social futures (Tally 2010). If the inability of the individual to imagine the totality results in alienation and anxiety, then in imagining a future without anxiety, the individual should become a more engaged and fulfilled citizen.

Notes

1. There are many arguments surrounding the delineation between fear and anxiety. Instead of becoming entangled between what are certainly important differences, this research will focus on the causes of and responses to both fear and anxiety within the specific historical context of neoliberalism. The categories themselves are less important than the interaction of both emotional states to the historically unique stage of capitalism - neoliberalism.
2. Extensive psychological research by Jost found that "system threat" and "fear of death" were the two strongest evokers of conservatism (2006, 662-3).

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