Article:

What makes for successful deployment of fear during a crisis?

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A year ago, the three of us came together out of shared concern for the place of emotions in politics and shared belief that many orthodoxies on fear as an instrument of public administration were just wrong. As the pandemic worked its way through communities and countries across the globe, it became increasingly clear that long-standing rejections of fear as a negative or pre-political emotion failed to grasp not just its adaptive evolutionary value, but the vital role it can play in enabling societies to deal with crises. We (Degerman, Flinders & Johnson 2020) set out the ways in which four key frames of analysis had been rendered inadequate by the pandemic. We argued that Hannah Arendt's notion that fear is anti-political is contradicted by numerous examples of collective action borne of preservation, adding that

> Contra [Martha] Nussbaum, fear can be rational and, contra [Zygmunt] Bauman, borne of knowledge, rather than ignorance. [Sara] Ahmed helps us see that structural inequality, which has only been exacerbated by the clusters of crises and poorly managed responses in recent years, means that fear is experienced unequally during pandemic. But what she fails to grasp is the qualified importance of fear politically; effective responses to COVID-19 may simultaneously require specific groups to experience ever greater fear of disease while at the same time being aware that efforts to achieve that may actually be self-defeating. (Degerman, Flinders & Johnson 2020, 17)

Our conclusion was that, as a consequence, there was space for new scholarship on *the politics of fear*. This issue is the most substantive iteration of that work.

While this issue provides new, original and innovative analyses of the pandemic, COVID-19 has reminded us of a truth apparent since our emergence as a species: we are animals vulnerable to communicable disease. In that context, it seems not just arrogant, but ridiculous, for human beings to have dismissed as pathological an evolutionary adaptation so vital for dealing with threats to existence. Fear stems from perception of threat and serves as a stimulus for action. It is not just a trigger of fight or flight. It can be much less pervasive than critics suggest and can permit considered development of strategies for dealing with threat (see Mobbs 2015).

That so many thinkers have pathologized fear can be explained by numerous factors. We, in industrialized countries, have experienced decades of peace, decades of rising life expectancies, decades of material growth and almost a century without pandemic. That stemmed precisely from the state-led collective social action during the mid-20th century, with the gradual dissolution of that collective action rendering society increasingly vulnerable to

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crises. Those favourable circumstances have abstracted us from the visceral basis of our being. It has also served to grant us misleading accounts of human agency.

Whether in Arendt's (2017) belief that fear is anti-political or Nussbaum's (2018) belief that fear is irrational and antithetical to doing and being well, there is a sense that fear is utterly incompatible with 'truly' human behaviour. This is unhelpful. On the one hand, it undermines our willingness to listen to an emotion that can often serve us well in identifying threat and thereby in ourselves. On the other, it fosters misconceived analyses of the nature of our circumstances and the ability to function while denying a fundamental element of our emotional spectrum. It also homogenizes society into one supposedly equal but essentially naïve 'state of fear'; whereas in reality the dividing line between 'the fearful' and 'the fearless' – and the rationality of those feelings – is itself a reflection of socio-economic position and life chances. What we term 'the paradox of fear' is the simple suggestion that if as a society we are to be in some sense free or fear (itself an arguably utopian endeavour) we need to better understand the channelling of emotions, the funnelling and flaming of fears, and the roots of contemporary concern.

Unfortunately, the conditions in which we find ourselves are 'sub-optimal' and there are good reasons to believe the pathologization our emotional experience of very real threats within our present circumstances has actually worsened the effects of the pandemic. Just as we come close to dealing with threats to health through cancer, so pandemics emerge by virtue of expansion of humanity into the biosphere in ways that foster zoonotic spill over (Vaughan 2021). Just as we come close to dealing with technological challenges of transport, so climate change creates pressures that lead to mass migration and attendant social conflict (Karak 2019). The next few decades may, conceivably, be the last decades of human existence (Berger 2019). We have existential reasons to fear.

In a sense, our trajectory toward self-destruction stems from an incredible capacity for self-delusion and denial (see Aronson 2008). All too often, humans have dismissed calls for planning for pandemics as hysteria and rejected climate change and population science that predicted emergence of pandemics as 'fear mongering' (Murphy 2019). Fear has been presented as weakness, pessimism, fatalism (Galpin 2016). The pandemic has shown that it need be none of these things.

Modern public discourse is replete with concern for phobias (see Begley 2012), in which the political pathologization of fear becomes infused with medical implications (Garcia 2017). This is due, in part, to the substitution of identity politics for materialism on the left and the permeation of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) through the entire political spectrum. Despite its first conceptual constituent part, EDI's emergence has been accompanied by a growth in material inequality. In part, this is because EDI has replaced traditional concern for transforming the material conditions of workers within manual professions in order to advance equality of income and wealth (see Hetland and Goodwin 2013) with often aesthetic and tokenistic concern for diversity. In effect, EDI accepts and seeks to justify inequality of income between professions and positions by presenting the labour market as fair and meritocratic, when it is often neither (see Amable 2011). It does nothing to transform understanding of the social value of professions, such as cleaning, nursing and caring, all of which are poorly remunerated precisely because they are perceived as 'women's work' (see Rubery 2017) or 'migrants' work' (see Orupabo & Nadim 2019). Kelly Osbourne's 'If you kick every Latino out of this country, then who is going to be cleaning your toilet, Donald Trump?', claim is particularly emblematic here (see Casares 2015). This shift not only undermines traditional materialist struggles, it also entrenches discrimination against the very minorities it is supposed to defend (women, ethno-cultural minorities, sexual minorities and disabled people) by legitimizing low wages and poor working conditions in professions in which they are over-represented and from which there is little chance of escape.

The effect of the left's acceptance over the last four decades of, first, the impossibility and, then, the undesirability of confronting capitalism has been profound. Explanations for fear-inducing inequality have shifted from materialist analysis of arbitrary and exploitative determination of labour market value to mere discrimination: from entire activities and those undertaking them being regarded as practically worthless to people not liking each other. A world of inequalities explained in terms of infantile, irrational phobic whims, rather than global socio-economic processes that render entire communities incapable of collectively improving their circumstances.

While this diagnosis framed oppositional politics as the problem, the treatment made for both individualization of pathologies (individuals need to be educated out of phobias (Thomas 2014)) and the attribution of responsibility for pathologies to the least well educated, who happen to be those whose interests the left previously sought to advance. With that, the most vulnerable suddenly went from victims of inequality, to perpetrators of pathology; and capitalists from oppressors to liberators by buying in to identity inclusive diversity programmes (Greenfield 2020).

This has had catastrophic impacts on social cohesion. Communities 'left behind' by neoliberal reform have lost their traditional political representatives and have moved ever further rightward as their, often understandable, fears of change have been misrepresented and dismissed. That has contributed to the marginalization of centre left political parties through the process of so-called PASOKification (see Diamond 2016). This process derived its name from the decline of the political party PASOK in Greece, but has also been seen the SDP in Germany, SP France and increasingly the Labour Party in the United Kingdom. Each of these parties have been unable to grasp the change in circumstances posed first by the 2007/2008 Global Financial Crisis and then austerity. Having adopted a non-confrontational, non-oppositional managerialism through radical processes of reform in the 1980s and 1990s, they have found themselves unable to match vision and policy setting by centre right- and right-wing parties and, in Greece, by far left-wing parties. Having convinced themselves that they are the natural parties of government on the back of their post-reform periods of success, they have rejected as pathological concern about reckless diminution of national institutions necessary for robust responses to crises. The pandemic has shown that material realities are all too important and that fears stemming from the dissolution of institutions were not necessarily irrational.

To be clear, we do not wish to assert that fear is an unalloyed good: it clearly is not. Homophobia, for example, is obviously harmful and stems from cultural processes that contort evolutionary rhetoric to bizarre ends. But, arachnophobia really does have an element of pragmatic value within it: our ancestors gained good benefit from avoiding unpredictable creatures with unpredictable venomous capacities. Fear of others during a pandemic ought not to be dismissed as phobic. Human beings are vectors and some degree of fear is a rational emotional response. The logical implications of Nussbaum's position is that the rational, mature, political actors during the pandemic have been the Trump supporting anti-mask libertarians who have been responsible for spikes in infection in numerous areas. The absence of fear can itself be irrational. That is clearly wrong. Governments need to take fear seriously and to avoid dismissing it as irrational or the result of some ideological or moral perversion (bigotry, xenophobia, etc.). They need to identify the utility of fear during periods of crisis, understanding that it can be the key initial means of ensuring compliance with necessary emergency powers. In order to ensure effective management of crises, fear must be sustained alongside the promotion of civic virtues, such as solidarity, responsibility and duty. It is those virtues that provide longer-term means of addressing the source of the crisis, not just in terms of healthcare and vaccination, in this instance, but also in rebuilding countries with the same spirit of state-led collective action seen in the wake of World War II. We recognize, however,

that granting emergency powers to governments runs the risk of placing society on the slippery slope to totalitarianism. Indeed, dictatorships are generally grounded in extended periods of emergency, martial law, often across decades. That is why some of the neoliberal reforms of recent decades have been so harmful: they have undermined the institutional checks and balances that foster freedom *through*, rather than from, the law. Rolling back the state has, counter-intuitively, rolled back some of the constraints on state action, permitting ever greater arbitrariness, while at the same time leaving individuals increasing precarious and vulnerable. Rebuilding society requires rebuilding institutions in ways that mitigate arbitrariness and address deep-seated structural inequalities.

There are several conclusions to be drawn from the first year of the pandemic; we would like to draw attention to six that are particularly salient in the present context. First, those societies that regarded fear as a legitimate response to a deadly pandemic have seemingly been more successful at mitigating its impacts than those that sought to minimize or dismiss fear. Countries that adopted a 'zero COVID' strategy were diverse in structure, but joined by belief that the illness was a serious threat and that serious threat could only be managed effectively through immediate, rigorous and often invasive public health measures.

Second, there appears to be no clear consensus in those successful societies about the value of individuals or collectives. New Zealand is a very different society to Vietnam in any number of different respects. However, those societies, in contrast to Isaiah Berlin's (2002) characterizations of social democratic and socialist commitments to positive liberty, appeared, from the outset, to prioritize preservation of human life over abstract, totalizing, economic calculation. Despite the subscription of UK Conservative politicians to deontic prioritization of individual rights, there was a tendency, early in the pandemic, to talk in collectivist (e.g. herd immunity), consequentialist (justifiable deaths) terms and to downplay the threat to life ('many more to lose loved ones' (BBC News (2020), not 'some of you will die').

Third, those societies that prioritized 'economic' survival had to mitigate or dismiss fear in ways that actively impeded their ability to manage the pandemic and reduce economic impact. Brazil, the US, the UK and elsewhere all emphasized the importance of economic outcomes to citizens and jingoistically dismissed fear of illness (Sky News 2020). They quickly (and repeatedly) lost control of the crisis. Too many citizens dismissed the pandemic as a threat that affected others, an illusion to advance other-worldly interests or as the result of inherent leftist weakness or authoritarianism permeating public administration (see Dean, Parker & Gramlich 2021). Time after time, those most vulnerable to the disease and those most likely to impose burdens on stretched public health systems were convinced by charismatic public figures that their adaptive intuitions were wrong. This meant that, when the UK Government, in particular, changed course, it was unable to re-instil the very emotion it had mitigated deliberately early on, or unintentionally through the Dominic Cummings affair (see Fancourt, Steptoe & Wright 2020). Having had their fear dismissed, citizens were less able to recognize threats in their daily lives and less willing to develop risk-averse strategies to minimize contagion.

Fourth, the pandemic has shown that, in order to manage threat, the state has returned as the most important economic unit in societies and is increasingly presented as playing a legitimate role in the economy (see Casalicchio 2021). Those who had sought to asset strip the state and to deride any state involvement in the economy as 'economically illiterate' or 'communist' suddenly found, like their predecessors during crises, that the state is the only institution capable of managing the pandemic. Suddenly, the Conservative Government found itself adopting large swathes of Labour's 2017 and 2019 manifestos, so much so that it is now to the left of Labour on investment in the economy. This is a pivotal shift of a scale not seen since 1945. It highlights just how extreme and just how utopian so many neoliberal and libertarian positions have been. The fact that one of our contributors (Moser 2021) has had to

grasp around for relevance in the work of someone often presented as the key mind of libertarianism – Nozick – is indicative of the inability of the market to resolve crises alone. It is the state alone that has the monetary capacity and strategic interest necessary to advance responses to threat. Dominic Cummings, for all the failings highlighted by Faulkner (2021) and Pettit (2021), is surely correct to state that EU Single Market rules on state aid, competition and tendering undermine effective responses to the pandemic (Cowburn 2021). Future industrial policy will likely look much more like the 1950s and 60s than the 90s and 00s. To deal with threat, there may need to be a reversal of free market reforms – a rolling back of a rolling back process.

Fifth, addressing inequality is central to mitigating threats that stimulate fear. Wilkinson and Pickett's (2009) seminal *The Spirit Level* demonstrates that unequal societies foster sources of fear: zero-sum competition, opportunities for arbitrary decision making and cliff-edge falls into destitution. Since then Anne Case and Angus Deaton's 'Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism' has revealed the prevalence of drug addiction, alcoholism and suicide as those who feel forgotten, 'left behind' and fearful of their capacity to cope in an increasingly uncertain world seek survival or escape. The work of Scheiring, Stuckler, and King (2020) reveals that 'deaths of despair' are by no means a solely American phenomenon; while Koob, Powell and White (2020) suggest that the emotional strain of social isolation and financial uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to increase the number of 'deaths of despair'. It is at this point tempting to work backwards through a seam of scholarship that would include Zygmunt Bauman's (2006) work on 'liquid fear', C. Wright Mills' (1959) arguments about 'the trap' within modern society, through to the work of Émile Durkheim (1952) on social anomie and suicide towards the end of the nineteenth century. But such temptations must be resisted in order to make the simple point that living in fear or feeling fear is a rational social condition for those experiencing increasing social, economic and psychological insecurity. A context, that is, in which the 'YOYO economy' (i.e. 'You're on your own') is fuelled by the precarity of those who exist in a fragile hinterland of insecure employment, and who pay the price for 'the great risk shift' (see Hacker, 2019). As anyone who has watched *I, Daniel Blake* will know, there's a world of difference between individualism as a value preference and individualism because there is no alternative.[4]

Inequalities have, since the New Right revolution of the 1980s, been justified via absolute gains: any increase in inequality is warranted by marginal gains in utility among the worst off (Hickson 2004, 127). This is central to the deployment of growth as a metric of assessment and to expansion of economic activity in ways that bring humanity into areas of zoonotic spillover, foster climate change and stimulate conflict. COVID-19 has highlighted the impact of that inequality in tragic and startling terms. Morbidity and mortality increases as income and opportunity decreases (Rimmer 2020). That is tragic for the most vulnerable in society, but its impact for society as a whole has been so significant as to have made converts among Conservatives to the case for increased equality of *outcome*, not just opportunity. It is clear that low socio-economic status imposes circumstantial constraints that mean that some people, perhaps rightly, fear starvation more than COVID-19, and, hence, fail to take adequate steps to avoid infection and contagion (Casciani 2020). This has radically reduced the ability of market societies, and those without socialized healthcare systems, such as Brazil and the US in particular, to address the pandemic.

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[4] *I, Daniel Blake* is a 2016 drama film directed by Ken Loach and written by his long-time collaborator Paul Laverty. It stars Dave Johns as Daniel Blake, who is denied Employment and Support Allowance despite his doctor finding him unfit to work. Blake struggles to navigate an on-line and alienating benefits system. The line 'I am not a blip on a computer screen or a national insurance number, I am a man' captures the social frustration and sense of anomie that many social studies have identified amongst sections of the public who feel forgotten or 'left behind'.

Sixth, there is no natural relationship between the performance of governments and public perception of performance. We began to develop this issue of *Global Discourse* just as Dominic Cummings had appeared to breach lockdown. Progressive journalists were heralding the inevitability of a return to prominence of the centre as natural, competent parties of government. That the UK Labour Party has made no impact in 'resetting' public discourse, while the Conservative Government continues to receive public support despite the deaths of hundreds of thousands of citizens, is due, in part, to the failure of the opposition to present an alternative vision capable of addressing people's fears in practical forms. Joe Biden's successful campaign and the two runoff successes in Georgia stem, not primarily from the incompetence of Trump, but the ability of the Democrats to highlight that incompetence in dealing with a threat and in providing coherent, achievable policies to address fear, whether from COVID-19 or socio-economic change.

The implications for policy are profound. While the Overton Window (i.e. the spectrum of ideas on public policy and social issues considered acceptable by the general public at a given time – see Mackinac Center 2021) is often presented as being shaped simply by public discourse, it is clear that circumstance is often more impactful. Nettle and colleagues (2021) have shown that perceptions of Universal Basic Income have radically shifted during the pandemic as people are exposed to the threat of destitution. This is a time in which ambitious, nation-building policy on a scale of the 1930s Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and the 1945 UK Labour reforms is possible. The UK Conservatives grasp this; apparently, 'centrists', across the board, do not. The world has changed and, if politicians and political parties are to achieve any impact, they need to recognize this. John Gray (2000) argued strongly that adhering to fetishized values constitutes fundamentalism, irrespective of whether the holder is liberal. Increasingly, there is evidence to support his claim that it constitutes fundamentalism *especially* where the holder is liberal.

In part, this is because deontic liberals operate according to crude social ontologies. All action is explained through methodological individualism. Individuals are assumed to have preferences that simply exist ready formed, are long-standing and are relatively consistent with the self. While respecting personhood has been a historically revolutionary event in the transformation of people's circumstances, an insistence on preserving existing rights, particularly concerning property, looks at odds with people's needs for security and stability. The absence, say, of the sort of robust social democratic institutions and attendant tax and spend policies taken for granted in Scandinavia, creates a space for politicians to present genuinely authoritarian, troublingly opportunistic policies that penalize and oppress minorities and stultify and punish opposition. The UK Conservative Government, which has refused historically to tax wealth to fund public institutions to mitigate fear-inducing threats, has exemplified this approach in its introduction of legislation to punish 'annoyance' in demonstrations with a maximum 10-year prison sentence. These are powers that promise security, but do little to address either the structural weaknesses that exacerbated the pandemic or the existential challenges that our species faces.

The contributions to this issue demonstrate these points in detail. Ruth Wodak (2021) begins by deploying discourse analysis to examine four frames used within EU countries to 'mitigate the "dread of death" (Bauman 2006) and counter the "denial of death" (Becker 2020): a "religious frame", a "dialogic frame", a frame emphasizing "trust", and a frame of "leading a war"'. The result is a comprehensive analysis of divergent and often dysfunctional national approaches and conclusion that 'defeating the virus and the pandemic in general implies confronting (and not denying) facts, defeating the illness and thus, the fear of death' (Wodak 2021). Elias Moser (2021) then examines the possibility of deploying Nozick's work on risk to justify interference. He concludes that 'a restriction of liberty… in order to reduce the risk of a spread of COVID-19 is, therefore, justified because of individuals' fears' – in the absence

of fear, 'the pandemic could be legally dealt with in the same way in which we handle other societal risks – e.g. air pollution' (Moser 2021). Peter Jones (2021) replies, differentiating between the emotion of fear and recognition of risk. He argues that Nozick might find reason to 'justify lockdowns even though their purpose was not, for the most part, to forestall rights-violations', concluding that it 'would be a strange state of affairs if, in a pandemic, the respect that a society was duty-bound to accord its citizens' rights could not but redound to its citizens' disadvantage'.

Next, Claudia Leeb (2021) deploys Adorno's work to suggest that the pandemic has heightened people's castration anxieties on economic, interpersonal and bodily levels 'in a class- and gender-specific way', before examining the ways in which right wing populists have engaged those anxieties to garner support. Noëlle McAfee (2021) replies, asserting 'the need for seeing right-wing extremism as an effect of a fantasy, not the agent or tricksters inculcating it'. Isabella Kalil and colleagues (2021) develop understanding of right wing populism further by examining the ways in which Jair 'Bolsonaro uses social fear during the pandemic as part of his permanent campaign in a process offering serious risks to both public health and democratic institutions'. Rodrigo Borba (2021) replies. This leads into Leland Harper's (2021) analysis of differences in experience of fear according to race and ethnocultural status, calling for more comprehensive collection of race-based data to inform more effective public policy.

Next, Pablo Fernández Velasco, Bastien Perroy, and Roberto Casati (2021) 'review the multiple dimensions of disorientation of the COVID-19 crisis and use state-of-the art research on disorientation to gain insight into the social, psychological and political dynamics of the current pandemic'. Drawing on a range of literatures, they call for us to 'overhaul our habitual frames of reference and to find new ways of navigating our social, temporal, epistemic and political environments'. Matthew Ratcliffe (2021) replies, arguing that 'being *oriented* in the social world is not just a matter of having stable, enduring frames of reference for navigating various domains', it 'also involves having the trust or confidence to let those frames remain indeterminate to some degree, relying on others to fill in the gaps if and when the need arises'. Marcella Schmidt di Friedberg (2021) replies further. Didier Bigo, Elspeth Guild and Elif Mendos Kuşkonmaz (2021) then examine boundaries of political power in the UK, EU and Turkey, concluding that the pandemic presents unique governmentality in respect of application of 'national-territorial logics of controls', understanding of COVID-19 through the lens of security and peer-to-peer surveillance. Kaspar Villadsen (2021) orients his reply around the following question: 'Do we witness a certain convergence between countries considered liberal-democratic and authoritarian regimes in terms of the parallel enhancements of citizen-surveillance, rule by appeals to fear, and restrictions of our freedom in terms of governments' use of personal data?'. Paul Faulkner (2021) then examines the Dominic Cummings breach of lockdown through 'the logic of social coordination problems', offering 'an explanation as to why… drops in compliance and trust were to be expected' as a consequence of his behaviour. Philip Pettit (2021) replies, examining the relationship between communal interests, communal standards and predictability of behaviour in mediating public trust in government guidance.

Ned Lebow (2021) presents an afterword, tracing the relationship between the contributions and distilling a set of conclusions about the ways in which the scholarship within the issue advances understanding of the politics of fear. He draws upon motivational psychology and political ideology to 'distinguish fear from fright and explore the role of both in the COVID-19 pandemic', arguing 'that fear generates strong public demands for protection and that these pressures can constrain or enable leaders depending on the circumstances, capabilities, but above all, their framing of the problem'. Finally, we conclude with a symposium on Frank Furedi's (2020) *Why Borders Matter: Why Humanity Must Relearn the Art of Drawing Boundaries*. John Hall (2021), David Bartram (2021) and Férdia Stone-Davis (2021) each review the book, with Furedi (2021) presenting a reply to critics. Although these

replies mark the end of this volume our hope as editors is that they also mark the beginning of a wide-ranging debate and discussion about the politics of fear (i.e. its social role, value, utility, framing, consequences, etc.), in particular, and about the role of emotions in society and politics, more broadly.

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