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In defence of fear: COVID-19, crises and democracy

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ABSTRACT
The COVID-19 crisis has served not just to instil fear in the populace but to highlight the importance of fear as a motivating dynamic in politics. The gradual emergence of political-philosophical approaches calling for concern for 'positive' emotions may have made sense under non-pandemic conditions. Now, however, describing fear in the face of a deadly pandemic as 'irrational' or born of 'ignorance' seems 'irrational' and 'ignorant'. In this article, we draw upon the work of John Gray and behavioural science to present a defence of fear. We show how the pandemic has highlighted deficits in the work of four thinkers highly critical of fear: Martha Nussbaum, Zygmunt Bauman, Hannah Arendt and Sara Ahmed. We argue that, if such approaches are to be of value in anything other than optimal conditions, then they have to acknowledge the fundamental role of fear in helping human beings to pursue fundamental interests.

Introduction

Crises, perhaps by their very nature, are highly emotive events. The COVID-19 crisis is no exception. Within the emotional landscape of crisis, a range of feelings – such as anxiety, panic and dread, faith and confidence – clash and collide in a dynamic and uncertain social milieu. It is, however, possible to suggest that the threat that crises present to fundamental notions of social organization and behaviour generally ensures the dominance of one key emotion: fear.

The politics of fear has been subject to much theorizing. For Hobbes (1985), fear is a prudent motivating dynamic. It is fear of one's fellow human beings that drives individuals to create social contracts capable of mitigating uncertainty. More recently, Judith Shklar (1989) conceptualized fear as the driving force behind liberalism and the achievement of a well-functioning liberal state. Not unlike Hobbes, she sees the role of liberal government as reducing fear, particularly fear related to arbitrary interference

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in individuals' lives by other individuals, organizations, or governments. While recognizing that fear itself can be a tool of oppressive social control for governments, she also observes that some degree of fear is unavoidable in human life and that any legal system implies 'minimal levels of fear' in order to incentivize compliance.

However, in the wake of the 'affective turn' and renewed interest in classical ideas of citizenship, Hobbes' and Shklar's are very much minority positions within political philosophy. When criticisms have been raised of the lack of concern for emotion in politics, more often than not, the deficit has been seen to relate to an inability analytically to conceive of the importance of 'good', 'healthy' or 'non-masculine' feelings. Martha Nussbaum (2018), for example, has presented fear as an intrinsically narcissistic emotion, antithetical to full maturity and citizenship. Indeed, the pandemic has provided *prima facie* evidence in support of this negative account of fear. Narcissistic fear may have been seen in mass panic buying and hoarding; at a societal level, the introduction of state-led social controls – i.e. lockdown and social isolation – has played into liberal fear of authoritarianism.

There may also, though, be reason to challenge received wisdom of the 'badness' of this emotion. Fear has been central in motivating people to comply with the kinds of decisive public health measures necessary for restricting transmission of the virus (see for example, Rasmussen & Goodman, 2020, Ch. 12; Chon & Park, 2019). It may also have played a role in fomenting collective action in support of vulnerable individuals and healthcare institutions.

In this article, we use the COVID-19 crisis as a lens through which to evaluate paradigmatic political conceptualizations of fear, arguing that the crisis has highlighted their relevance but also their limitations in accounting for the place and purpose of the emotion. The analysis we conduct is grounded in answering a pragmatic question in keeping with the work of John Gray: to what extent are these approaches of value to human beings wishing to survive pandemic? We identify four emblematic approaches from both continental and analytical traditions that share in common belief that fear is, in some way, negative. First, we evaluate the common assumption that fear is irrational, via Martha Nussbaum's recent work. We then consider Zygmunt Bauman's claim that fear in modern society has become 'liquid'. Next, we use Sara Ahmed's work to explore the connection between fear and inequality. Finally, we draw on Hannah Arendt to examine the relative failure of some liberal-democratic governments in managing the outbreak and whether the associated fear may contribute to autocratization. This enables us to consider whether liberalism is equipped ethically to deal with fear stemming from radical unpredictability. We conclude that the four positions, despite their differences, share deficits that suggest, in Gray's terms, a tendency toward fundamentalism. We argue that, given that the

paradigmatic accounts we examine do not caveat their value as being restricted to optimal political circumstances, it is essential that their proponents take seriously the practical challenges posed by COVID-19 and that policymakers, pragmatically, consider specific contributions from a range of different, revised accounts in managing public responses to the crisis. This is a first and early attempt to stimulate such an effort. It serves as an initial defence of fear. We begin by introducing Gray's anti-fundamentalism and an evidential basis for the importance of circumstance on human preferences.

Pluralism and pragmatism

The COVID-19 pandemic raises a cluster of practical issues that remind us of both the general, animal nature of our being and the particular, human capacities of our species. All too often, contemporary political philosophy has taken for granted the material satisfaction of human needs and the enduring security of life within liberal democracies. This is one of the reasons that the work of John Gray has often appeared antiquated. Gray (1997) reminds us that humans have basic biological, animal and social needs that must be satisfied if they are to do and be well (p. 58). These enduring needs cannot be overcome and cannot be transformed. Where progress has taken place, it has taken place in finding practical means of satisfying these needs securely and in minimizing avoidable suffering. We achieve this by developing strategies guided by values choices that respond to the particular challenges posed by our particular circumstances (Gray, 2004a, pp. 1–8, 41–48). These strategies can be grounded clearly in reason, but often they depend upon speculative 'radical choice' (Gray, 2000, p. 65). Vitally, though, we need to be pragmatic in assessing our choices against the extent to which they promote our enduring interests (see Gray, 2003, xi, 2002, pp. 127–128), seeking simply to stave 'off disaster from day to day' caused by short-sighted 'fecklessness' (Gray, 2004a, pp. 30–31).

The biggest threat to our survival lies in fundamentalist doctrines that fetishize single value sets as being uniquely and universally valuable to human beings irrespective of circumstance (Gray, 2003, xi–xv, 2004a, pp. 1–8, 2004b, pp. 1–58). Gray (2000) regards liberal doctrines as being particularly prone to universalism by virtue of their fetishization of liberty as non-interference (pp. 21, 135). This fetishization serves, not simply, to undermine human interests in parts of the world that are not suited to liberal-democratic approaches, but also inhabitants of liberal democracies themselves, who are denied pragmatic responses to a range of social, economic, political and environmental challenges. Those challenges, which include market 'failure' and climate change, constitute changes in circumstance that call for the deployment of different values as part of different strategies to uphold fundamental human interests in satisfying needs.

Interestingly, policymakers are often surpassed by public opinion in terms of pragmatism. There is a great deal of evidence that experience of war leads to increased support for welfare provision (Obinger & Schmitt, 2019), while previous pandemics may have contributed to support for expanded health care systems (Breitnauer, 2019). During this pandemic, there has been increased interest in Universal Basic Income (UBI), which Nettle et al. (2020) suggest may be due to belief that the policy can mitigate stress associated with fear of destitution efficiently during pandemic. This all indicates that, as Nettle and Saxe (2020) have argued, that human beings' preferences depend upon the weighting they assign to different features of policies and that that weighting differs as circumstance differs. 'Thus, a policy that feels right for peacetime may not feel suitable for war; and, pertinently, one that feels right for normal times may no longer feel right for a pandemic' (Nettle et al., 2020).

In this context, it is important to remember that fear is an evolutionary adaptation. Mobbs et al. (2015) outline the part it plays within a psychobiological Survival Optimization System (SOS) as follows:

> the goal of the nervous system is to reduce surprise and optimize actions by (i) predicting the sensory landscape by simulating possible encounters with threat and selecting the appropriate pre-encounter action and (ii) prevention strategies in which the organism manufactures safe environments. When a potential threat is encountered the (iii) threat orienting system is engaged to determine whether the organism ignores the stimulus or switches into a process of (iv) threat assessment, where the organism monitors the stimulus, weighs the threat value, predicts the actions of the threat, searches for safety, and guides behavioral actions crucial to directed escape. When under imminent attack, (v) defensive systems evoke fast reflexive indirect escape behaviors (i.e., fight or flight).

Fear is the emotional response to perception of threat. It is a crucial motivating dynamic that enables humans, and other species, to survive.

That perception of threat can, of course, be erroneous. Phobias are irrational precisely because they identify existential threat in harmless objects, organisms, individuals or behaviours. A phobic response can irrational because the strategies it promotes are, in Gray's terms, fundamentalist: unchanging even when circumstances change and when other strategies better promote the satisfaction of human needs. The pragmatic challenge is balancing rational, pragmatic and irrational, fundamentalist responses threat. For policymakers, this is particularly important given the potential for government both to be phobic and to promote phobic responses among the populace. At base, though, Gray's pragmatism complements behavioural science and, indeed, older political-philosophical accounts of the place of fear as a motivating dynamic, in suggesting that fear can be both natural and beneficial. It is clear, indeed, that the general public's ability to perceive threat in COVID-19 has been beneficial to dealing with the pandemic and that, at

least at its height, the danger was not too much fear, but not enough of it. This assessment is, though, at odds with the claim that fear is irrational.

Fear and (ir)rationality

Fear is among the most vilified emotions in political scholarship (for recent examples see Bader et al., 2020; Furedi, 2018; Nussbaum, 2018). The only emotion to shoulder more blame for our political ills in recent years might be anger (see for example, Condit, 2018; Maskovsky & Bjork-James, 2020; Nussbaum, 2016). Among the most popular criticisms of fear is that it is irrational, and that, as a political force, it simply gets in the way of rational – and especially science-based responses – to crises.

Nussbaum (2018) provides one such account, claiming that fear is prone to a number of errors in formulation. One common source of these errors, she says, is 'the availability heuristic', a psychological concept which suggests that, if we experience an issue as particularly salient, we tend to overestimate its importance. To illustrate the relationship between fear and the availability heuristic, Nussbaum relates a recent incident in which the US news media reported that apples had been contaminated by a dangerous pesticide called Alar, leading people to believe that this constituted a significant health risk. Nussbaum (2018) goes on to state that, while we still are not sure about the health risks of Alar, 'we certainly know by now that study, not panic, would have been the appropriate response' (p. 48). It is doubtful that panic is ever an appropriate response to a crisis, and since both we and Nussbaum are actually more concerned with fear, we will maintain focus on the latter emotion instead.

So would fear be a rational response to news that our apples are laced with a carcinogen, which Alar is? The answer appears to be 'yes'. If there were no reason to fear it at all, then why would anyone commission further study into it, and who would be driven to support it? Nussbaum's point seems to be that we should not be so afraid as to alter our own day-to-day behaviour based on news reports about Alar, before we know whether it actually is dangerous in the quantities consumed by individuals. But what would be unreasonable about experiencing the kind of fear that makes us stop buying apples treated with Alar and instead start buying, say, organic apples? Nussbaum herself suggests that it took some time before the risks of Alar contamination were scientifically established. So, it is not clear why it would be more reasonable to wait for further study about the risks of Alar – which might take years – rather than to let fear drive us to another readily available option (i.e. the precautionary principle), while we wait for studies to be completed. Moreover, waiting for scientific studies to establish that something is a threat as well as to find an appropriate response to it, and to show that it is a greater threat than competing issues or considerations, is often not

option in decision-making either at an individual or governmental level. Indeed, in the context of the COVID-19, Western governments' insistence on waiting for conclusive scientific research, rather than acknowledging that the available evidence provided good reasons for fear, likely delayed and undermined the effectiveness of responses to the virus and contributed to public complacency about the outbreak. Hence, if anything, the apparent issue was not that government and citizens acted in fear instead of waiting for scientific evidence; it was that they did not experience sufficient fear in the face of the available evidence. This may well be a reflection of an uncritical commitment among policymakers to the kind of liberal politics we discuss later on. To illustrate, the Conservative UK Government – with its concern for non-interference in the market – reacted much more slowly and less decisively than the Social Democratic Danish Government.

In asserting the irrationality of fear, Nussbaum (p. 48) also sets up a false dichotomy in public decision-making. She claims that '[i]n technical areas, there is no substitute for good and comprehensive scientific research, but the public often follows fear rather than science'. But, this, firstly, fails to recognize that fear and scientific evidence can fit hand in glove, and that the result of this pairing can be both good – e.g., more funding for research on treatments and vaccines for COVID-19, and people heeding government advice – and bad – e.g., people panic buying groceries because scientists of various kinds have said that this is a disaster of unimaginable proportions (see also Borland, 2018). Secondly, and perhaps more crucially in the present context, Nussbaum implies that science is a substitute for political action by citizens and politicians. This depoliticized picture mirrors the one painted by politicians in the UK and elsewhere who present themselves as vessels following advice experts, which is ironic given that some of the same politicians, such as Michael Gove MP, were recently declaring that the public had had enough of experts (see Farrar, 2017). The idea that science will solve this crisis and that we do not have to rely on fallible politicians can be a soothing one, but it is also troubling, since it implies that ordinary people are themselves powerless to do anything about it. That should be an especially concerning narrative for capabilities theorists, since this suggests both a dystopic view of a populace incapable of autonomous thought and a technocratic vision of government unbending to democratic discourse. But, perhaps more problematically for the 'irrational' account of fear, there were various occasions in which scientists and the public appeared to share more accurate perceptions of threat than politicians. Scientists and those with scientific training had every reason to fear COVID-19.

The narrative of fear as 'irrational' is particularly dangerous insofar as it attributes particular agency to elite scientific actors apparently bereft of an ability to perceive threat. The Swedish epidemiologist Anders Tegnell's admission of error in developing a relatively *laissez-faire* strategy has not

only had an impact on public faith in policy (Lindeberg & Rolander, 2020), it may also undermine Sweden's strong tradition of faith in government and expertise. Had the Swedish government acted out of a very rational fear of threat to impose greater restrictions earlier, it could have saved lives. That would be a rational outcome driven by an emotion that has evolved precisely to achieve that end. Indeed, as *The CDC Field Epidemiology Manual* suggests, scientists have a role to play in deploying fear to navigate crises (Rasmussen & Goodman, 2020). Simply rejecting fear as irrational is, simply, irrational. The neglect of changing circumstances is, in fact, a hallmark of fundamentalism. The question should not be whether or not fear is rational, but how to develop policy grounded in rational deployment of the emotion when threat emerges.

Fear and liquidity

Many political analyses of fear, including Nussbaum's, focus on fear primarily as a subjective experience, albeit obviously an experience that many individuals can experience simultaneously and toward the same object. But in order to understand the origins, dynamics, and uses of fear in the context of COVID-19, we cannot view fear as an individual experience and certainly not as an experience that we can reason ourselves out of at will. Fear does not just exist within us, but also between us, because it is, at least in part, a function of the unpredictability of the world around us. This challenge is at the heart of Zygmunt Bauman's concept of 'liquid fear'.

'Fear is at its most fearsome when it is diffuse, scattered, unclear, unattached, unanchored, free floating, with no clear address or cause', Bauman suggests (2006), 'when it haunts us with no visible rhyme or reason, when the menace we should be afraid of can be glimpsed everywhere but is nowhere to be seen' (p. 2). He goes on to define fear as follows:

> 'Fear' is the name that we give to our *uncertainty*: to our *ignorance* of the threat and what is to be *done* – what can and what can't be – to stop it in its tracks – or to fight it back if stopping it is beyond our power. (Bauman, 2006, p. 2)

The links between Bauman's position and the emergence of COVID-19 as a global pandemic are as numerous as they are obvious. But in order to forge a tight connection within the limits of this section, it is useful to focus on just three dimensions: modernity, derivatives and overload. These elements flow, fittingly, from Bauman's focus on liquidity, while also seeping across to offer connections across and within the work of Nussbaum, Arendt and Ahmed. At the heart of Bauman's position is a critique of modernity and the achievements of the Enlightenment, in the sense that the promise of science, rationality and state capacity had neither mastered nature nor reduced the sphere of blind fate. Far from bringing an end to dispute and disasters,

parasites and predators, modernity had, if anything, increased the range of 'new' risks which were particularly pernicious exactly because of their lack of tangible form and the absence of obvious solutions. This has given rise to what Bauman terms derivative fear, a 'state of mind' or 'state of being' unbound from any specific fear to exist within a certain condition of being uncertain and therefore afraid. In this regard, uncertainty serves as an insidious form of threat particular to modern circumstance.

The transition from specific fears to the psychological internalization of general fear*fulness* is of great significance for several reasons. Most clearly, the manner in which once an individual, group, or community has adopted a certain vision of the world that is implicitly based upon assumptions of vulnerability, distrust and danger can determine, even in the absence of a genuine threat, the extent to which they resort to utilization of defensive or aggressive 'fight or flight' response mechanisms. The existence of 'derivative fear' also matters because these mechanisms may also be targeted on socially constructed 'folk devils' through complex processes of '*other*ing' that may, in fact, be far removed from the actual source of the issue stimulating fear. And yet it is exactly the unanchored and diffuse nature – its innate *liquidity* – that facilitates the emergence of socially constructed and often politically motivated othering, 'scapegoating' or 'demonization'. This, in turn, brings us back to the topic of rationality but serves to place it within an emotional context that simply acknowledges how and why feelings tend to trump facts (see Flinders, 2020). Once established, 'derivative fear' is very often unmoved by the existence of rational arguments that may well be underpinned by 'research', 'data' and 'the latest science' and which seek to assuage concern.

It is in this context that Nussbaum's concerns about fear have particular salience. However, it may be that Bauman's characterisation of modernity provides a framing for the source of generalized fear at odds with Nussbaum's own liberal democratic intuitions and faith in progress. Bauman draws our attention to the way in which the modern state presents itself as having the capacity to manage fear by protecting citizens against unpredictable threats to their existence. He was undimmed in his belief that the state had largely failed in this regard. If anything, the state fuelled new fears while at the same time seeking to delegate responsibility for managing risks to the realm of the individual: 'our liquid modern society is a contraption attempting to make life with fear liveable … a contraption meant to repress the potentially disarming and incapacitating dread of danger' (Bauman, 2006, p. 6). This critique of the self-imposed limits of liberalism, clearly, runs parallel to Gray's.

And yet hidden within Bauman's focus on liquidity is an element that dovetails with his emphasis on 'derivative fear' and serves to contextualise this article's focus on COVID-19, but which has never been articulated with quite the clarity it arguably deserves. That is, it is impossible to talk about the

'politics of' fear in relation to any one single event, threat or risk; or, to put the same point slightly differently, COVID-19 emerged into a socio-political context that was to some extent conditioned by narratives of crisis. It was fear*ful*. From the global financial crisis to a succession of epidemics (Bird Flu, SARs, MERs, Ebola) through to the climate change crisis, the Eurozone crisis, and ongoing concern regarding the vaunted 'crisis', 'death' or 'suicide' of democracy, 'liquid life' appears an increasingly precarious journey in which the respite between fear-laden narratives of impending crisis appears increasingly brief. In the UK, for example, the 'COVID-crisis' emerged at exactly the moment when the long-running 'Brexistential angst' appeared to be moving towards some form of resolution (see Clark, 2020). This, in turn, underlines that the 'politics of fear' *vis-à-vis* coronavirus crisis cannot be studied in isolation and should more accurately be conceived as being layered-upon or inter-woven with a complex patchwork of challenges within modern liberal democratic society.

Despite the insight to be gained from Bauman's understanding of the politics of fear, it is weighed down by an unjustified assumption, namely, that fear stems from ignorance. Bauman is not alone in presuming this. The fear/ignorance coupling pervades political thought and folk psychology, such that it has become a truism that ignorance breeds fear. It is related but not identical to the claim that fear is irrational. People's derivative fear may stem from a lack of knowledge of an issue, but it is a striking feature of the current crisis that many of our fears are not fuelled by ignorance but by knowledge. It was medical knowledge that made us begin to see actions, things, and people that we used to consider harmless as potential sources of a deadly virus. As Gray's concern for circumstance, and Nettle and Saxe's work on circumstantial shaping of preferences suggests, fear of the virus and its vectors has driven us to upend not just our own habits, but economic and political habits as well, demonstrating the force of knowledge-fuelled fear, however temporarily it may be. People are now washing their hands and working from home. Conservatives have turned against privatization and austerity. Knowledge-fuelled fear has, in some ways, made the impossible possible. Those who have held out against change have been dogmatic in ways that seem self-defeating.

Acknowledging the relationship between fear and knowledge does not deny the insights we have highlighted in this section. Mostly, it enriches them. For if modernity has generated a veritable sea of liquid fear, what this relationship highlights is the capacity of knowledge to crystalize fear around – or make it 'stick to' – certain issues or people. This can help us break habits and dogma. But it can also break people and institutions. As Mosgaard Andreasen (2020) highlights, the creation of knowledge that a group of people should be feared is central to processes of othering, and we shall see in the next section that knowledge has been deployed to the same end in

the current crisis. Yet the fear/knowledge coupling does challenge Bauman's implied hierarchy of fear, according to which focused fear is less fearsome than liquid fear. This hierarchy might be plausible for those sheltered in ivory towers and gated communities, for whom circumstances may not seem radical to change. But it is far removed from the reality of someone who knows that their low-wage job exposes them to increased risk of infection or that people see them as culpable spreaders of disease because of the colour of their skin. To claim that their fears are somehow less fearsome simply because they are able to name the objects of their fear is patently absurd.

Fear and inequality

The discussion so far could be taken to suggest that fear and, relatedly, unpredictability are phenomena that affect everyone equally. The core assumption of political parables, such Hobbes' state of nature, is that fear is universal (Hobbes, 1985; see also Davies, 2019, pp. 36–40). But fear in the Hobbesian state of nature cannot possibly be equal. While everyone may experience some fear in the state of nature, the weak have more to fear than the strong, the disadvantaged more than the advantaged. Early in the outbreak, the virus was often described as an equalizer. Everyone was vulnerable to it and therefore everyone feared it. To an extent, fear of the virus has been a shared experience, and it has, as we discuss in later on, facilitated solidarity across different parts of society. Yet, it quickly transpired that the virus did not impact everyone equally or uniformly. The elderly, the poor, and ethnic minorities are considerably more vulnerable to the virus than others. People quickly became aware of this, with the footballer, Troy Deeney, specifically citing increased risk of mortality as a reason for additional care (McInnes, 2020). Hence, fear, even in a pandemic, is not equal. To help us explore the relationship between fear and inequality in the current crisis, we turn to the work of Sara Ahmed.

Ahmed's (2014) conceptualization of the politics of fear focuses on mobility and difference. In terms of mobility, she observes, firstly, that fear itself mobile; it moves between 'bodies'. Secondly, it constrains the mobility of some bodies, while enhancing the mobility of others. In terms of difference, she argues that fear is, firstly, experienced differently by different bodies, and, secondly, that it establishes and preserves differences in power between bodies (pp. 68–70). Ahmed's central examples of these facets of fear are drawn from accounts of racism, islamophobia, and misogyny. In such instances, fear seems to establish zero-sum relationships between two groups, in which, although both sides might experience fear, one side gains power (or mobility) from it and the other loses it. These concepts have lent themselves particularly well to analyses of contemporary far-right movements and tactics (see for example, Leser & Spissinger, 2020; Mosgaard

Andreasen, 2020). But they are also useful in understanding the role and implications of fear in the current crisis, which has, notoriously, contributed to a surge in racism across the world.

While COVID-19 has arguably created a situation in which all or most bodies, even our own, have become fearful, it has made some bodies particularly frightening. We see this, for example, in the xenophobia aimed at Asian people in North America and Europe, fuelled partly by President Trump and right-wing media referring to COVID-19 as the 'Chinese' or 'Wuhan' virus. The Asian-American author, Cathy Park Hong (2020), related her personal experiences of the surge of anti-Asian racism in the US, interspersed with brief, harrowing accounts of coronavirus-related attacks on Asians in the US and in other parts of the world, including the UK. These accounts range from Asians being chased with disinfectant to being spat at to being stabbed. A friend told Park Hong, apparently half-joking, that they were afraid to leave their home, not because of the virus, but because they worried about becoming a victim of hate crime. 'It doesn't matter if our families hail from Thailand, Burma or the Philippines', Park Hung remarks. 'We don't have coronavirus. *We are coronavirus*' [emphasis added]. This powerfully captures Ahmed's politics of fear, both in terms of difference and mobility. The coronavirus may mean that fear – to borrow Ahmed's metaphor of emotional 'stickiness' – has stuck to all bodies because anyone may have it. But this fear has not simply stuck to Asian bodies, it has effectively permeated them; to fear the virus is to fear Asians. The differential distribution of fear and the attacks it engenders produce the immobilizing fear expressed by Park Hong's friend, that is, fear of racially motivated attacks.

Yet, experiences in the crisis also complicate Ahmed's picture of fear. Because it has highlighted that marginalized groups may not simply suffer from fear sticking to them, but also from having fear slide off them. Again, the US provides an important example. Evidence shows that African Americans suffer more infections and more deaths than the average population (Millett et al., 2020). The structural inequalities suffered by members of this community constitute or have contributed to the factors that drive this deadly disparity. Underlying health conditions such as asthma, diabetes and obesity are the most salient of them. But these inequalities also appear to contribute to a lack of or insufficient fear. Historical cases of medical experimentation on African Americans as well as present-day bias against black patients in the healthcare system mean that they are more likely to distrust the healthcare system and healthcare advice (Ebony Boulware et al., 2003). There has been lack of information as well as disinformation, such as claims that black people were immune to the disease (Breslow, 2020). As a result, fear of the virus may not have circulated through parts of the African American community to the same degree that it has in others, likely leaving members more vulnerable to the virus and less able to protect themselves.

We find a similar example in Sweden, where the government has famously taken a lighter-touch approach than most others. Although it is less *laissez-faire* than many people on the right have made it out to be, the Swedish government's approach has been primarily advisory rather than regulatory. Although the relatively high number of deaths in Sweden still requires more substantive explanation (see Giesecke, 2020), what is clear is that several immigrant communities, particularly Somali Swedes, have been hit considerably harder than other segments of the population. Here too, a lack of fear seemingly forms part of the problem. Many Somali Swedes are first-generation immigrants living in ethnically homogenous enclaves in poor suburbs (Kerpner, 2020). Because they are less likely to speak Swedish or to consume Swedish language media, government advice is less likely to reach them, meaning that fear of the virus may not circulate as widely. Moreover, while most Swedes have a high level of trust in government, Somali immigrants come from a country where the distrust of government, for good reasons, runs deep. They are hence less likely to heed government advice, and fear of the virus may not stick. As a Somali-Swedish doctor remarked in an interview: 'People just aren't as afraid of corona. [...] They have experienced so much worse things in their native country and think that nothing as dangerous can happen in Sweden' (Ferhatovich, 2020 [authors' translation]).

That issue of cultural conceptualization of threat and faith in government is distinct from but may compound structural exposure to threat by virtue of poverty. Higher mortality rates among BAME Britons can likely be explained through reference to poverty and the health inequalities that result from choices and lifestyles imposed by resource scarcity and fear of destitution. The Institute for Fiscal Studies, for example, suggests that economic disadvantages may force ethnic minorities into situations where they are at greater risk of exposure to the virus (Platt & Warwick, 2020). Those who work as cleaners, transport workers, porters and in other public-facing roles are both poorly paid and exposed to increased risks of contracting COVID-19. BAME citizens disproportionately fill these occupations. For those with low levels of residual wealth in a society in which social security has been diminished through austerity, individuals' fear of the coronavirus is subordinated to fear of lost income by giving up dangerous occupations.

Understanding the role that fear has played in creating these disparities in mortality rates will of course require further investigation. The challenge, though, is to find means of engaging specific groups that do not experience sufficient fear in ways that avoid marking their bodies as sources of fear for others. There may be ways in which highlighting exposure to unequal levels of risk can be a source of solidarity and reducing inequality as Wilkinson and Pickett (2020) hope. The danger, however, is that marking certain groups as needing fear serves as an extrinsic mortality cue. Behavioural science indicates that, when individuals are presented with information that suggests

a lower level of life-expectancy, their interests are foregrounded (Nettle, 2010) and they make short-term decisions that undermine longer-term health interests and serve to compound health inequalities (Pepper & Nettle, 2017). This is apparent in the failure of anti-smoking campaigns, which, by highlighting smoking-related disease, actually have a negative impact on smoking cessation (Adams et al., 2015). These are 'rational' recalibrations of interests borne of knowledge not ignorance – why invest more in longer-term goods, if they will only be realized after death? Again, this only highlights the ways in which, contra Nussbaum and Bauman, knowledge ought not to be seen as a simple antidote to irrationality and ignorance. We need, therefore, political responses that serve to increase people's overall perception of life expectancy while highlighting particular threats to it in order to elicit fear-driven risk aversion. That depends upon broader structural changes within liberal democratic societies to ensure that some groups do not have to trade-off fear of death from COVID-19 off against fear of death from starvation. This is particularly challenging given that such reform may depend on enlarging the state, at a time pandemic-related fear may be undermining trust in the liberal-democratic state.

Fear and autocratization

Perhaps the most significant source of fear expressed during the twentieth century was that of totalitarianism. In light of fascism, communism and other forms of fundamentalism, there has been widespread fear that government can destroy people's freedom in seeking, as in Hobbes, to reduce fear. Shklar (1989), for example, says 'Systematic fear is the condition that makes freedom impossible' (p. 29). On this, she was, notably, in uncharacteristic agreement with Arendt, a theorist best known for her conceptualization of totalitarianism and political action. Arendt (2017) characterized fear as an 'antipolitical' principle, which destroys possibility for political action by citizens, which, for Arendt, was synonymous with freedom. According to her, the destructive potential of this principle was realised by totalitarian governments sustaining themselves through control and surveillance of people in their homes – dismantling the private sphere – and prohibition of unauthorized public gatherings – dismantling the public sphere. The result was a fear-fuelled loneliness diametrically opposed to the togetherness that political action entails (Arendt, 2017, p. 628, see also, 1998, p. 202; Lucas, 2019). This strategy is, of course, every bit as fundamentalist as those associated with fetishization of liberty as non-interference by Gray.

It is easy to see the resonances between the coronavirus crisis and Arendt's account of fear and its political effects under totalitarianism. In the past few months, the public sphere – in both the physical and more abstract democratic sense – has narrowed markedly. Across several European countries,

including the UK, local or national elections were postponed or curtailed in some fashion (Brown et al., 2020). In the UK, Parliament closed for a month, limiting political debate and scrutiny of the government's actions. Moreover, social distancing measures mean that protests and rallies have effectively become illegal. And, as in any crisis, growing calls for unity are likely to shrink toleration of dissent. Indeed, if the government's characterization of its decision-making in the current crisis is to be believed, political debate would do little but impede the work of scientists. Fear of the coronavirus has also allowed increased government regimentation of people's private sphere. Social distancing laws extended into people's homes, limiting their ability to leave and barring them from having guests or, in the UK, having sex with chosen partners (Child, 2020). Moreover, several liberal democracies have introduced or plan to introduce contact tracing apps, some of which involve sharing not just location data but medical data without participants' consent.

With some exceptions, most societies have sought pragmatically to preserve enduring human interests, even at great material cost. However, among the negative consequences of these measures is a widespread and acute sense of loneliness in which fear can run rampant. Not only does the isolation deprive individuals of many of the external and social resources – the affective scaffolding (Colombetti & Krueger, 2014) – they might ordinarily use to manage their fears. It also exacerbates subjective and objective powerlessness in the face of a crisis in which only medical experts have any real knowledge or control, or so the UK government has suggested.

We do not mean to suggest that fear of the coronavirus has pushed the UK or other Western liberal democracies into totalitarianism. But it may have weakened further people's already tenuous trust in democratic institutions and processes (see, for example, Hansard Society, 2019). The Edelman Trust Barometer's *Trust and the Coronavirus* (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2020) report, which was published on 1 April and surveyed 10,000 people across 10 countries, found that 85% of respondents agreed that 'we need to hear more from the scientists and less from politicians'; 58% were concerned about the politicization of the crisis ('Certain people are making the situation seem worse than it is for political gain'); and that scientists were trusted to tell the truth by 83% of those surveyed, compared to 51% who trusted their prime minister or president. Meanwhile, some illiberal governments, prominently China, have at least given the appearance of being more effective than liberal ones in limiting the spread of the virus by managing fear through forceful regulation of both public and private spheres. These regimes are in effect fulfilling their part of a quasi-Hobbesian social contract by protecting their citizens against unpredictable threats. Rather than taking the shortcomings of liberal democratic political institutions and their responses to the current crisis as an invitation to look for ways to strengthen them, fearful

citizens may well see these failings as more evidence that these institutions cannot be trusted (see Fukuyama, 2020). Hence, democracy may seem worth sacrificing in exchange for predictability. This is entirely in keeping with Nettle and Saxe (2020) work on preferences.

While some of the implications of fear resonate with Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism, there are also key differences. Crucially, people are continuing to organize politically in new and unexpected ways. We have seen fear give rise to courage and bonds of solidarity. The more than 750,000 people in England who volunteered to support the National Health Service (NHS) are a key example of this. Evidently, they are not engaging revolutionary political action, which might lead radical political theorists like Chantal Mouffe (2005) to argue that this collectivity is not a political one. Some Arendtians may also contend that these people are not acting politically. After all, the action of the volunteers, concerted as it might be, is not giving rise to something novel and unexpected – often represented as the quintessence of political action in the Arendtian sense. Their action is simply affirming an extant institution. Yet, in so doing, the NHS volunteers are enacting another aspect of political action that Arendt also emphasized: preservation (e.g., Arendt, 1998, p. 204). People are acting in concert for a public purpose because of fear of infection, fear of the impact of the virus on loved ones or fellow citizens, and fear of what it might mean for the NHS and its staff. While these purposes are many, an overarching one is quite clearly to preserve the NHS – one of the most valued 'public things' (Honig, 2017) in Britain – against the threat, the fear, of collapse and everything that a collapse would imply for the inhabitants of this country. Thus, even though fear of COVID-19 has undoubtedly curtailed freedom in significant and, perhaps, necessary ways, it has certainly not left us unable to act politically. As Kingston (2011, p. 181) has observed, fear can 'reinforce a deeper sense of humanity and build new solidarities'. Indeed, crises can bring political opportunities (see Klein, 2020, 2007) to expand our political imagination and our horizon of political possibility. For example, the social democratic reforms that followed World War II were inconceivable outside of that climate of crisis and involved a great deal of intervention in people's lives via programmes of nationalization and taxation. They preserved and expanded democracy, a fact which also contradicts the suggestion that preservation of societies through fear-borne renewal is apolitical. The challenge, now, is for liberal-democratic governments to harness the potential for renewal presented by fear through reform to address the expanding clusters of crises without continuing the slide toward autocracy. This depends on fostering predictability.

Fear and (un)predictability

The authoritarian drift of at least some parts of the liberal-democratic citizenry is demonstrative of the need for predictability. Liberalism has, from the outset, been concerned with achieving predictability by minimizing forms of interference. The problem is, as Bauman notes, the liberal-democratic state appears increasingly incapable of achieving this. There are at least *prima facie* reasons to believe that dominant strands of liberalism are not particularly well equipped to address the kind of unpredictability that fosters fear that COVID-19 has engendered. Historically, liberalism arose out of deep frustration with the vestiges of feudalism (see, for example, Siedentop, 2014, pp. 265–278). Feudal societies imposed forms of socially and geographically impermeable order, in which the capacity for any action was determined by status. The *de facto* potential for arbitrary interference was great. It was often impossible to travel, conduct commerce, marry, or practise faith without permission from one's superiors. Liberalism was, in part, borne of frustration with the capacity of individuals to interfere. Not only does the threat of arbitrary interference foster fear, as Hobbes illustrated viscerally, it also precludes the possibility of individuals pursuing morally significant ends at odds with the ends pursued by those with the capacity to interfere. For those liberals, like Kukathas (2003, p. 71), for whom non-interference is sacrosanct, if individuals are denied the possibility of pursuing morally significant ends, they are deprived of the possibility of living lives that they themselves value. Their lives are rendered meaningless. As such, liberals have regarded the attainment of non-interference as the structural basis of justice. As Isaiah Berlin (2002, p. 124) makes clear, this depends upon the state deploying interference in order to restrict greater interference:

> Individuals are largely interdependent, and no person's activity is so completely private as never to obstruct the lives of others in any way. 'Freedom for the pike is death for the minnows'; the liberty of some must depend on the restraint of others.

The point, though, is that people's preferences should and generally do change in response to changing circumstances. Those who fetishize non-interference are more likely to oppose national healthcare systems, public vaccination projects and forms of public guidance (see Danvers, 2020; Dougherty, 2020; Fishman, 2020), which are essential means of responding effectively to the fear of COVID-19. They are likely to view health and life as merely part of an individual's conception of the good to be pursued by individuals (see Kristian, 2020). That looks, not just reckless, but bizarre at a time of pandemic.

Gray is surely right that paradigms ought to be evaluated pragmatically, and Hobbes that fear is a motivating force capable of leading to constructive

outcomes. In this instance, the shift in people's preferences indicates that successful strategies lie in highlighting threat, accepting the rational experience of fear, and creating sources of security that avoid fixing fear to specific bodies. Those sources of security are, actually, ones that are of value in any circumstance: predictable and sufficient income, effective and accessible healthcare and policing guided by the rule of law. These are mechanisms of collective risk-reduction (see discussion in Morales, 2016) that are valuable in most or all circumstances precisely because they are essential to the satisfaction of basic needs. They ought to be realized differently, but their value is universal and public opinion shifts in favour of recognizing the value of the NHS, of UBI and of essential workers reflects the honing of people's understanding of their core interests while exposed to threat.

In this sense, there is need for those in public office, prudentially or otherwise, to understand that COVID-19 has not only affected the framing of people's perceptions, but the nature of what constitutes 'sensible' public policy. Autocratic governments appear to have presented clear responses to the shifts in circumstance. Those, such as Lukaschenko in Belarus, who have not responded adequately to fear have lost legitimacy. Liberal democracies need to ensure that they do not follow suit by fetishizing, for example, non-interference in taxation of those with the capacity to support the public purse.

Conclusion

According to Shklar (1989), 'when we think politically, we are afraid not only for ourselves but for our fellow citizens as well' (p. 29). In this paper, we have taken this invitation to re-think our understanding of the politics of fear. Drawing on the work of Gray and those who view fear as an adaptive motivating dynamic, we have shown that COVID-19 radically unsettles several key characterizations of fear in politics. The present crisis stimulates fear of disease and of our fellow citizens for good reasons. Contra Nussbaum, fear can be both rational and, contra Bauman, borne of knowledge, rather than ignorance. 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.

Perhaps the most hopeful means of responding to these distinct, but related, challenges may lie in pursuing resilient forms of non-interference via expansion of social security. Again, though, any such attempts run the risk of enhancing existing processes of autocratization and are themselves liable to elicit fear of

interference via taxation among particular groups. The broader point in examining the approaches above, though, is that for too long citizens of liberal democracies have overlooked the importance of predictability. Too often, people have bemoaned the dull predictability of their lives. Facing the possibility of intubation and death is really not the unpredictability that bored Westerners had in mind. Yet, this should remind us that the opposite to dull predictability can just as well be terrifying unpredictability as it can be a new relationship, a lottery win or a new job. This is where liberal-democratic processes appear to be falling behind autocracies, and, with the public primed to affirm normality, this is an opportunity for liberal democracies to renew social contracts with reference to achieving security through policies that promote equality. Failing to do that not only leaves significant parts of the populace open to increased rates of mortality due to inequalities in social determinants of health, it also deprives society of the capacity to manage fear in governance.

The examination of key paradigmatic approaches above highlights the ways in which settled approaches to fear have been challenged and undermined by COVID-19. It also suggests that effective deployment of the politics of fear depends upon transcending paradigms in light of the new normal and integrating them effectively into the policymaking process.

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