The only thing we have to fear is the 'culture of fear' itself

NEW ESSAY: How human thought and action are being stifled by a regime of uncertainty.

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Fear plays a key role in twenty-first century consciousness. Increasingly, we seem to engage with various issues through a narrative of fear. You could see this trend emerging and taking hold in the last century, which was frequently described as an 'Age of Anxiety' (1). But in recent decades, it has become more and better defined, as specific fears have been cultivated.

The rise of catchphrases such as the 'politics of fear', 'fear of crime' and 'fear of the future' is testimony to the cultural significance of fear today. Many of us seem to make sense of our experiences through the narrative of fear. Fear is not simply associated with high-profile catastrophic threats such as terrorist attacks, global warming, AIDS or a potential flu pandemic; rather, as many academics have pointed out, there are also the 'quiet fears' of everyday life.

According to Phil Hubbard, in his 2003 essay 'Fear and loathing at the multiplex: everyday anxiety in the post-industrial city', ambient fear 'saturates the social spaces of everyday life' (2). Brian Massumi echoes this view with his concept of 'low-grade fear' (3). In recent years, questions about fear and anxiety have been raised in relation to a wide variety of issues: the ascendancy of risk consciousness (4), fear of the urban environment (5), fear of crime (6), fear of the Other (7), the amplification of fear through the media (8), fear as a distinct discourse (9), the impact of fear on law (10), the relationship between fear and politics (11), fear as a 'culture' (12), and the question of whether fear constitutes a 'distinctive cultural form' (13).

Fear is often examined in relation to specific issues; it is rarely considered as a sociological problem *in its own right*. As Elemer Hankiss argues, the role of fear is 'much neglected in the social sciences'. He says that fear has received 'serious attention in philosophy, theology and psychiatry, less in anthropology and social psychology, and least of all in sociology' (14). This under-theorisation of fear can be seen in the ever-expanding literature on risk. Though sometimes used as a synonym for risk, fear is treated as an afterthought in today's risk literature; the focus tends to remain on risk theory rather than on an interrogation of fear itself. Indeed, in sociological debate fear seems to have become the invisible companion to debates about risk.

And yet, it is widely acknowledged by risk theorists that fear and risk are closely related. As Deborah Lupton notes in her 1999 book *Risk*, risk 'has come to stand as one of the focal points of feelings of fear, anxiety and uncertainty' (15). Stanley Cohen makes a similar point in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, published in 2002, where he argues that 'reflections on risk are now absorbed into a wider culture of insecurity, victimization and fear' (16). A study of New Labour's economic policies argues that they are couched in the 'language of change, fear and risk' (17).

The terms 'fear' and 'risk' have been used pretty much interchangeably in many studies of risk in recent years. Yet where the sociology of risk has become an important and ever-growing field of inquiry, the theorisation of fear remains underdeveloped and immature.

Norbert Elias has made perhaps the most significant contribution to the sociological study of fear. In his 1982 book *The Civilising Process Vol 2: State Formation and Civilization*, Elias argued that fear is one of the most important mechanisms through which 'the structures of society are transmitted to individual psychological functions'. He argued that the 'civilized character' is partly constructed by people's internalisation of fears. This is a striking and important insight into the history of fear and society (18). Unfortunately, Elias' insights have not been developed in relation to the *contemporary* experience of fear. Indeed, today writers and thinkers tend to use the term

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'fear' as a taken-for-granted concept that needs little explanation or elaboration.

The aim of this essay is to examine the various elements of fear in the here and now. It will explore how fear works, and isolate the key elements of today's culture of fear. According to David Garland, in his 2001 book *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society*, when it comes to fear of crime 'our fears and resentments, but also our commonsense narratives and understandings, become settled cultural facts that are sustained and reproduced by cultural scripts'.

The idea of 'cultural scripts' can help to reveal much about emotions such as fear. A cultural script communicates rules about feelings, and also ideas about what those feelings mean. Individuals interpret and internalise these rules according to their circumstances and temperament, while always remaining very much influenced by the rules. As Elias notes, 'the strength, kind and structures of the fears and anxieties that smoulder or flare in the individual never depend solely on his own "nature"'. Rather they are 'always determined, finally by the history and the actual structure of his relations to other people' (19).

So the impact of fear is determined by the situation people find themselves in, but it is also, to some extent, the product of social construction (20). Fear is determined by the self, and the interaction of the self with others; it is also shaped by a cultural script that instructs people on how to respond to threats to their security. So getting to grips with fear in contemporary society will require an assessment of the influence of culture. Instead of treating fear as a self-evident emotion, a taken-for-granted concept, we should explore the meaning attached to fear and the rules and customs that govern the way in which fear is experienced and expressed.

Sociologists need to ask questions such as 'what may be the meaning of emotional events?' when they are examining fear today (21). One of the most perceptive studies of the history of emotions says we must distinguish between the 'collective emotional standards of a society' and the subjective feelings of the individual (22). While the emotional experience of the individual is, of course, an important aspect of the problem of fear, we must also try to conceptualise fear as a social phenomenon. Cultural norms that shape the way in which we manage and display our emotions also influence the way that fear is experienced.

For example, experience tells us that the intensity of fear is not directly proportional to the objective character of the specific threat. Adversity, acts of misfortune and threats to personal security do not directly produce fear. Rather, our responses to specific circumstances are mediated through cultural norms, which inform people of what is expected of them when they are confronted with a threat; how they should respond, how they should feel.

Arlie Hochschild, in her pathbreaking study in 1979 of the sociology of emotions, described these informal expectations of how we should respond to things as '**feeling rules**' (23). These 'feeling rules' influence behaviour; they instruct us on what we ought to fear, and how we ought to fear it. According to Anthony Giddens, 'people handle dangers and the fears associated with them in terms of emotional and behavioural formulae which have come to be part of their everyday behaviour and thought' (24). But the transformation of anxious responses into *fear* also requires the intervention of social forces, of what I have labelled 'fear entrepreneurs' (25).

As the sociologist David Altheide has argued, 'fear does not just happen; it is socially constructed and then manipulated by those who seek to benefit' (26). While this description of socially constructed fear tends to inflate the role of self-interest – the extent to which fear entrepreneurs exploit fear in order to gain some direct benefit – its emphasis on the role of human agency in the making of fear is nonetheless a useful counterpoint to the idea that fear is something natural or purely psychological.

So, the meaning and experience of fear are continually shaped by cultural and historical factors. The historical fear of famine is very different, for example, to today's 'powerful fear' of being fat (27). The meaning that societies once attached to fear of God or the fear of Hell is not quite the same as today's fear of pollution or of cancer. And fear does not always have negative qualities. The sixteenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes regarded fear as being essential for the realisation of the individual and of a civilised society (28). For Hobbes, and others, fear could be seen as a fairly reasonable response to new events and big changes. In the individual, too, fear

has not always been viewed as a negative emotion. As David Parkin argued in his 1986 essay 'Toward an apprehension of fear', as late as the nineteenth century the sentiment of fear was linked to 'respect', 'reverence', 'veneration'. 'Fearing the Lord', for example, was culturally celebrated and valued. In contrast, the act of fearing God today sits far more uneasily with the prevailing cultural outlook.

Matters are complicated further by the fact that the words and phrases used to describe fear are culturally and historically specific. Today, we talk about fear as something unspecific, diffuse, and intimately tied to the therapeutic view of the individual. In her important study of the cultural history of fear, published in 2005, Joanna Bourke points to the importance of the recent 'conversion of fear into anxiety through the therapeutic revolution' (29). Anxieties about being 'at risk' or feeling 'stressed' or 'traumatised' or 'vulnerable' show very clearly that today's individualised therapeutic vocabulary influences our sensibility of fear.

Contemporary fear culture

In an important contribution to the debate about how culture impacts on the population, Ann Swidler argued that 'people vary greatly in how much culture they apply to their lives' (30). But in the very act of using culture, people 'learn how to be, or become, particular kinds of persons'.

Swidler argues that this 'self-forming' continually calls upon the symbolic resources of the wider culture. 'Through experience with symbols, people learn desires, moods, habits of thought and feeling that no one could invent on her own', she observes. And these habits of thought and feeling influence the way that individuals make sense of their experiences, and also how they perceive of threats and how they respond to threats. As Norbert Elias stated, the strength and form of 'shame, fear of war and fear of God, guilt, fear of punishment or of loss of social prestige, man's fear of himself, of being overcome by his own affective impulses' depend upon 'the structure of his society and his fate within it'.

Threats are mediated through the cultural outlook. And today, the role of culture is arguably *more* significant than it was in previous times. According to Stefanie Grupp, in her paper on the 'Political implications of a discourse of fear', individual fears are cultivated through the media and are less and less the outcome of direct experience. 'Fear is decreasingly experienced first-hand and increasingly experienced on a discursive and abstract level', concludes Grupp. She also suggestively notes that 'there has been a general shift from a fearsome life towards a life with fearsome media' (31).

This point is echoed by Altheide, who claims that 'popular culture has been the key element in promoting the discourse of fear' (32). Even Osama bin Laden seems to have grasped this trend. In an interview in October 2001, when asked 'why is the Western media establishment so anti-humane', bin Laden replied: '[Because] it implants fear and helplessness in the psyche of the people of Europe and the United States.' The legal theorist Christopher Guzelian argues that this indirect aspect of fear is the most distinctive feature of contemporary fear culture. He believes that 'most fears in America's electronic age' are the results of 'risk information (whether correct or false) that is communicated to society'. He concludes that it is 'risk communication, not personal experience, [that] causes most fear these days' (33).

However, the influence of fear today cannot be explained as a direct outcome of the power of the media. The very real dynamic of individuation means that fear is experienced in a fragmented and atomised form. That is why fear is rarely experienced as a form of collective insecurity, as it often was in earlier times. This shift from collective fears to individuated fear is captured well by Nan Elin, who argued in the 1999 book *Postmodern Urbanism* that the fear we sense today is no longer the fear of 'dangerous classes'; rather, fear has 'come home' and become privatised (34). The sensibility of fear is internalised in an isolated fashion, for example as a fear of crime or as a rather banal 'ambient fear' (as Hubbard describes it) towards life in general. Hubbard notes that this is a kind of fear that 'requires us to vigilantly monitor every banal minutia of our lives', since 'even mundane acts are now viewed as inherently risky and dangerous' (35).

Low-grade fears and risks seem to be flourishing and capturing people's imaginations. The real significance of this development, however, of this move towards a more individuated form of fear, is the highly personalised, even customised way in which fear is experienced now. As Zygmunt

Bauman argues, postmodernity has *privatised* the fears of modernity. 'With fears privatized...there is no hope left that human reason, and its earthly agents, will make the race a guided tour, certain to end up in a secure and agreeable shelter', Bauman writes (36).

John Keane has drawn attention to another aspect of the privatisation of fear – namely, today's growing tendency to transform private fears into public ones. The privatisation of fear encourages an inward orientation towards the self. According to one interesting study, when members of the public are interviewed about the personal risks they face they tend to represent 'crisis, fears and anxieties as self-produced and individual problems, the products of "personal biography"' (37).

Fear as a problem in its own right

A recurring question in public debates on contemporary risk consciousness is whether society is more fearful today than it was in the past. Some believe that today's 'magnitude and nature of fear' is different to the past, since 'it seems that fear is everywhere' (38). Studies on the fear of crime argue that there has been a growth of fear in everyday life. For Elin: 'The fear factor has certainly grown, as indicated by the growth in locked car and house doors and security systems, the popularity of gated or secure communities for all age and income groups, and the increasing surveillance of public space…not to mention the unending reports of dangers emitted by the mass media.' (39)

However, an increase in the quantity of fear is difficult to measure, since the very meaning of fear is itself continually changing. That is why, as Andrew Tudor argues, 'simply to document the considerable range of fears given currency in our cultures is not enough' (40). We must remember, says Tudor, that 'late modern conceptions of fear are distinctive in their fundamental character when compared with other periods and societies'. The starting point to gaining an insight into the socio-cultural nature of contemporary fear is to emphasise the quality and meaning of fear, rather than its quantity.

Fear is often said to be the defining cultural mood in contemporary society. Yet the institutionalisation of fear through the issuing of health warnings, through risk management, through media stories and so on, should not be interpreted as proof that the quantity of fears has increased. Maybe it has; maybe it has not. Nor can we conclude on the basis of existing evidence that people feel fear more intensely than did earlier generations. The prominent role of fear today merely indicates that it serves as a framework through which we interpret a variety of experiences.

The prominence of fear in contemporary culture also suggests that fear works as a problem in its own right. In recent years, particularly as a result of risk theory, fear has become objectified. Alan Hunt has noted that 'risk discourse transposes anxieties into an objectivist problematic' (41). As a result, fear is increasingly perceived as an autonomous problem. Consequently, 'fear becomes a discourse', which 'expands beyond a specific referent and is used instead as a more general orientation' (42).

A distinguishing feature of contemporary fear is that it appears to have an independent existence. In this respect, it resembles the way in which social anxiety was discussed and understood in the 1940s and 50s (43). But whereas anxiety was viewed as a diffuse intangible condition, fear today seems to exist in an objectified form as a clearly identifiable social problem. Fear *in itself*, rather than the thing that we have become fearful in response to, is a distinct problem of our times.

Classically, societies associated fear with a clearly formulated threat: the fear of death, the fear of a specific enemy, the fear of hunger. The threat was defined as the object of fear; the problem was not the feeling of fear, but the things that were feared: death, illness, hunger. Today, many see the very act of fearing as a threat in itself. Consider the debate about the fear of crime. Nowadays fear of crime is seen as a serious problem that is to some extent distinct from real acts of crime. As Garland observes: 'Fear of crime has come to be regarded as a problem in and of itself, quite distinct from actual crime and victimization, and distinctive policies have been developed that aim to reduce fear levels, rather than reduce crime.' (44). Indeed, it seems that the fear of crime is 'now recognised as a more widespread problem than crime itself' (45).

It is far from clear what has been measured when statistics point to an increase or decrease of the

fear of crime. As Chris Hale has suggested, it seems that often what is measured is not so much the fear of crime as 'some other attribute, which might be better characterised as "insecurity with modern living", "quality of life", "perception of disorder" or "urban unease"' (46).

However, this process of trying to quantify a cultural mood means that the fear of crime becomes objectified, and thus can acquire a force of its own. Its objectification may turn it into a 'fact of life', and this can help to legitimate, if not even encourage the fear response.

Often today, public anxiety and concerns are discussed as material factors that can have a decisive impact on people's health and wellbeing. Many in contemporary medical culture claim that stress and fear are likely to increase the risk of heart disease, cancer and chronic lung disease (47). In Britain, the conclusion of an inquiry into the alleged health effects of using a mobile phone is now regarded as a model for how to respond to contemporary health fears, particularly those related to environmental health. The Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones (IEGMP), set up 'to keep ahead of public anxiety', concluded that there was no known health threat posed by mobile telephony – yet it argued that the anxieties stirred up simply by the presence of mobile-phone masts need to be taken seriously, since public fear in itself could lead to ill-health (48).

There is always a potential for people's health anxieties to turn into a major problem. Phil Strong, the medical sociologist, has written about an 'epidemic of suspicion' that can cause serious public health problems (49). However, it is only fairly recently that fear has also been discussed as an autonomous cause of illness.

When we witness the autonomisation of fear, then the question becomes not simply what is causing fear, but what are the potential negative consequences of fear? This can lead to strategies that focus on managing feelings of fear, in order to offset their damaging impact, rather than focusing on the source of the problem. If people fear that their health is at risk, than this fear is often seen as actually posing a risk to their health (50). The legal systems in the US and the UK have internalised this view of fear; courts are now moving towards compensating people for their feelings of fear, even when there is an absence of a perceptible physical threat. As Guzelian has noted, in the past 'fright' – that is, a reaction to an actual event – was compensated, whereas now the fear that something negative *might* happen is also seen as grounds for making a compensation claim (51).

The autonomisation of fear is linked to the view of risk as an independent variable. Risk communication today is informed by the idea that 'fear itself is a risk and must be part of risk-management policymaking' (52). The transformation of fear into a risk runs alongside the transformation of risk into a negative experience. Terms like a 'good risk' or a 'risk worth taking' are noteable by their absence in contemporary debate. Risk is not even represented as being neutral today; instead risk is almost always associated with negative outcomes which people are expected to fear.

Through risk management, fear is institutionalised and the fear response is further encouraged and culturally affirmed.

The free-floating and raw character of fear

The volatility of fear today is captured well by Parkin. He says there has been a shift from a concept of fear that 'encompassed…respect' to what he calls 'raw fear'. He describes the former as an 'institutionally controlled fear', while 'raw fear' has more of a free-floating and unpredictable character (53). Bourke claims that this move towards more 'nebulous anxiety states' is due to the decline of tangible threats to corporeal existence that were brought about by war, for example, in earlier eras (54). However, as I noted previously, it is likely to be the privatisation of fear that makes it so arbitrary and fluid today.

In contemporary societies, fear is unpredictable and free-floating. It is volatile, often because it is unstable and not focused on any specific threat. So today, fear can migrate freely from one problem to the next without any causal or logical connection. When in June 2002 the Southern Baptist leader Reverend Jerry Vines declared that Mohammed was a 'demon-possessed paedophile', and that Allah leads Muslims to terrorism, he was simply taking advantage of the free-floating fear narrative. Strikingly, he latched on to two big fears in contemporary culture:

paedophilia and terrorism (55). This arbitrary association of paedophilia and terrorism has the effect of amplifying the fear of both. In the same way, constant claims that this or that hurricane, flood or other natural disaster is a symptom of global warming impacts on people's perceptions and fears of such events.

Fear today has a free-floating dynamic. It can attach itself to a wide variety of events and phenomena. Consider the fear of terrorism. Since 9/11, this fear has continually expanded to cover almost all aspects of modern life. 'Corporations must re-examine their definition of risk and take seriously the possibility of scenarios that only science fiction writers could have imagined possible one year ago', argues a leading economist (56). In the five years since 9/11, what were previously seen as fairly normal hazards have been turned into exceptional threats by their association with the action of terrorists. So we no longer worry about the apparently everyday hazard posed by a nuclear power station; we also fear that it may be used as a weapon of mass destruction against us by terrorists.

The fact that more and more areas of life are seen as targets for terrorists – buildings, power stations, the economy and so on – has little to do with the increased capabilities of terrorists; rather it reflects the growth in competitive claims-making around fear and terror.

Today's free-floating fear is sustained by a culture that is anxious about change and uncertainty, and which continually anticipates the worst possible outcome. This 'culture of fear', as I and others have called it, tends to see human experience and endeavour as a potential risk to our safety. Consequently, every conceivable experience has been transformed into a risk to be managed. Garland writes of the 'rise of risk' – that is, the explosion in the growth of risk discourse and risk literature. He notes that little connects this literature together, other than the use of the word 'risk' (57).

The very fact that risk is used to link together a variety of otherwise unconnected experiences highlights today's mood of uncertainty. Fear, like risk, has become a taken-for-granted concept, even a cultural affectation for expressing confusion and doubt. For the French social theorist Francois Ewald, the ascendancy of the fearful and precautionary culture is underwritten by a 'crisis of causality', by a feeling of uncertainty towards the relationship between action and effect. Ewald suggests that the institutionalisation of precaution 'invites one to consider the worst hypothesis (defined as the "serious and irreversible" consequence) in any business decision'. The tendency to engage with uncertainty through the prism of fear, and therefore to anticipate the worst possible outcome, can be understood as a **crisis of causality**.

Kurt Riezler, in his early attempt to develop a psychology of fear, similarly drew attention to the influence of ideas about causality on the way that people respond to threats. 'They have been taken for granted – and now they are threatened' is how Riezler describes a situation where '"causes" are hopelessly entangled' (58).

The question of causation is inextricably bound up with the way that communities try to make sense of acts of misfortune. Questions such as 'was it God?' or 'was it nature?' or 'was it an act of human error?' have important implications for how we understand acts of misfortune, and how we deal with them. Confusion about causation encourages speculation, rumours, mistrust. And as a result, events often appear to be incomprehensible and beyond human control.

The new identity of vulnerability

'Whom and what we fear, and how we express and act upon our fearing, is in some quite important sense, as Durkheim long ago realized, constitutive of who we are.' (59)

Today, the autonomisation of fear has important implications for identity, for how we see and understand ourselves. The idea that we are the subject of threats – threats which have an independent existence – has given rise to the concept of generally being '*at risk*'. The emergence of this 'at risk' category ruptures the traditional relationship between individual action and the probability of a hazard (60). To be 'at risk' is no longer just about the probability of some hazard impacting on you; it is also about who you are as a person. 'At riskness' has become a fixed attribute of the individual, like the size of your feet or hands. Public officials frequently categorise whole groups of people as being at risk.

The perception of being at risk encourages the emergence of what we might call a fearful subjectivity. According to Ulrich Beck: 'The movement set in motion by the risk society…is expressed in the statement **I am afraid!**' Therefore, says Beck, the 'commonality of anxiety takes the place of the commonality of need'. In the process, fear has become something which shapes and makes our identities.

To be 'at risk' clearly assigns to the individual a passive and dependent role. Increasingly, someone defined as being at risk is seen to exist in a permanent condition of vulnerability – and this informs the way that we make sense of the threats we face. As a metaphor, vulnerability expresses the idea that communities lack the emotional and psychological resources necessary to deal with change, to make choices, or to deal with adversity.

'Vulnerability' is now seen as the natural state for most people. As a label it is used to describe entire groups in society. Officials and community groups now frequently use the recently-constructed concept of 'vulnerable groups'. The term vulnerable group does not simply refer to groups of psychologically distraught people or to those minorities who are economically insecure. Instead, we are all seen as being vulnerable in one way or another. Children, most strikingly, are automatically assumed to be vulnerable. A study into the emergence of the concept of 'vulnerable children' found that, in most published literature, the concept is treated as 'a relatively self-evident concomitant of childhood which requires little formal exposition': 'Children are considered vulnerable as individuals by definition, through both their physical and other perceived immaturities.' Moreover, this state of vulnerability is presented as an intrinsic attribute. It is 'considered to be an *essential* property of individuals, as something which is intrinsic to children's identities and personhoods, and which is recognisable through their beliefs and actions, or indeed through just their appearance' (61).

And it isn't just children who are defined as a vulnerable en masse. So are women, the elderly, ethnic minorities, disabled people, the poor. Indeed, if all the groups designated as vulnerable by experts and policymakers were added together, they would probably constitute nearly 100 per cent of the population!

The sense of vulnerability is so deeply ingrained today that it is easy to overlook the fact that, relatively speaking, it is a recently-invented concept. The term 'vulnerable group' first started to be used in the 1980s. One study notes that the tendency to frame children's problems through the metaphor of vulnerability first emerged in the 80s, but really took off in the 90s (62). The authors of the study searched a major bibliographical database, BIDS, and found that over 800 refereed papers between 1986 and 1998 focused on the relationship between vulnerability and children. The authors noted that 'while in the first four years of this period there were under 10 references each year to vulnerability and children, an exponential increase to well over 150 papers a year occurred from 1990 onwards'. They believe that this figure underestimates the tendency to discuss children's lives in terms of vulnerability, since it does not take into account the substantial non-academic literature on the subject.

A survey of the LexisNexis database of newspapers confirms the findings of that academic study. It shows that 'vulnerable group' is a relatively recent concept. An analysis of articles in the *New York Times* suggests the term began to be used in the 1980s. Between 1973 and 1979 there were no references to vulnerable groups in *New York Times* articles. A similar pattern is evident in the UK. Before the mid-1980s, use of the term 'vulnerable group' was rare. It began to be widely used from 1985 to 1987.

More significantly, it appears that in the late 1980s the word 'vulnerable' started being used to describe people's intrinsic identities. Vulnerability was no longer seen as something that springs from specific circumstances, for example poverty; rather it was considered to be an inherent condition of an individual. This shift is best captured by the newly emerging term 'the vulnerable'. The move from the idea that people are 'vulnerable to…' various problems to the use of the noun 'The Vulnerable' captures the sense of powerlessness and fragility that underpins the rising use of the v-word today. Vulnerability is a state of mind, an identity, rather than a description of your relationship to a specific threat.

The emergence of vulnerability as an identity is linked with the objectification of fear discussed

above, which first started occurring in the 1980s. A heightened consciousness of threats and risks is 'experienced as an ordeal of unexpected vulnerability', argues Ewald. His claim that the expression 'to be "vulnerable"' is a newly constructed 'sacred term' is an important insight into contemporary fear identity. From this point onwards, fear ceases to be just an emotion; it is also an important part of the construction of identity. This was captured well in a report from the International Labour Union, which warned about 'fear in the workplace'. Guy Standing, one of the authors of the report, argued that 'unless [fear in the workplace] is reversed, the vulnerable will become more vulnerable' (63). Here we can see that even the supporters of trade unions self-consciously describe their members as 'vulnerable'.

Through ideas about vulnerability, a sense of fear starts to be seen as a normal state of being. The flipside of this deflation of the status of human subjectivity is the inflation of the threat that external forces pose to the individual self. In public debate today, the alleged vulnerability and impotence of the individual stands in sharp contrast to the formidable powers attributed to the everyday challenges we face. Through the constant amplification of the risks facing humanity – pollution, global warming, catastrophic flu epidemics, weapons of mass destruction, and various health scares – even the limited exercise of individual choice appears to be restricted by today's harsh regime of uncertainty.

The identity of vulnerability is the flipside of the autonomisation of fear.

Conclusion

A proper sociological understanding of fear requires further research into the way in which this emotion is mediated through today's cultural outlook. We must address not simply the emotion of fear and the threats to which it is a response, but also the crisis of causality that shapes the fearful subject. As indicated previously, twenty-first century fear culture is increasingly being normalised as a force in its own right. In such circumstances, fear is a means through which people respond to and make sense of the world.

This stands in sharp contrast to the approach taken by US President Franklin D Roosevelt in his inaugural address in 1933, when he stated that the 'only thing we have to fear is fear itself'. Roosevelt was trying to assure the public that it is both possible and necessary to minimise the impact of fear. His was a positive vision of a future where fear would be put in its place by a society that believed in itself. Today, politicians are far more likely to advise the public to fear everything, including fear itself.

Frank Furedi is author of *Politics of Fear: Beyond Left and Right*, published by Continuum (buy this book from Amazon(UK)). Visit his website here. This essay is based on a talk delivered at the NY Salon debate, 'Living in a state of fear' at the New School on 20 March 2007.

Previously on *spiked*

Frank Furedi argued that fear has become a powerful force that dominates the public imagination, and that politics has become a contest of doom-mongering. After 9/11, **Dr Michael Fitzpatrick** reported on how the culture of fear spread to his health centre in east London. **Rob Lyons** called bird flu an infectious panic. For a measured approach to the latest scare stories, read our Don't Panic column. Or read more at: *spiked* issue Risk.

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