**The History of Fear in the Age of Anxiety : Historical Perspectives**

*At the turn of the XXth century, in Europe as well as in America, new threats were suddenly felt, new perils feared. “We are entering the age of crowds”, declared Gustave Le Bon in a book,* The Psychology of Crowds *(1896), which was to become an instant literary success. The age of crowds seemed to open an era of disorder and chaos. In the exact same period, but in America this time, struck an epidemic of “panic novels” dedicated to the irrepressible fears spreading among markets crowds, while major financial crisis erupted in 1893 and 1907. In the political arena as in the marketplace, at the dawn of mass society and in a time of major political and economic change, individuals were contaminated by fuzzy, diffuse, scattered, unclear, free floating and contagious forms of fear. It did not take long for psychopathology to identify a new state of fear in mass society, which Freud then coined as “anxiety”. But “if fear does not need an introduction”, as Freud himself used to say, anxiety certainly does, and this is what this presentation is about: how can you write the history of a nomadic and fleeting emotion with no fixed or identifiable object?*

I would like to do, in this historical introduction to our discussion, two simple things. First of all, following up on Tracy Adams’ characterisation of the states of fear and anxiety in the medieval and early modern period, I will try to determine when and under which historical circumstances the contemporary perception of the problem has emerged as such. And, second, I will also briefly try to show how the question of the relation between fear and anxiety could be posed in general historical terms.

By doing so, I will insist on the problem of anxiety, which I recognize as an essential feature of the psychology of individuals living in mass society. Why this insistence on anxiety? Simply because there is in the literature no history of anxiety. Although one has at hand innumerable histories of fear, or rather histories of its innumerable causes, even of its multiple political uses – works with variations on titles like *The Politics of Fear* are almost countless in the English language social science literature[[1]](#footnote-1) – the causes of anxiety seem to be missing in them as are historical overviews. Anxiety is most often understood as a sort of collective mood or feeling which shows itself in given historical periods called, in the literature to which I have just alluded, *The Age of Anxiety.* A “politics of fear”, then, and “ages of anxiety”, sometimes without any relationship between the two, sometimes mechanically placed one after the other; that is, when they are not quite simply blended, which is most often the case.

So, are we living in the “age of anxiety”, as W.H. Auden predicted in his famous 1948 poem with the same title[[2]](#footnote-2), in which he says: “Here they come, the fears that we fear”…. , which is, by the way, quite a relevant introduction to the question. We can fear fear, the object of fear can be fear itself. And, if this is the case, how can you write the history of anxiety – which is the task I have embarked upon - that is, how do you write the history of an emotion with no other object, or cause, than itself?

**The birth of modern anxiety**

So, a word, first of all, on the birth of modern anxiety. How has anxiety become an essential component of our mental universe? Let us consider the turn of the XXth century, in Europe as well as in America: new threats were suddenly felt, new perils feared. Let us move to Europe first and detect there the emergence in political and cultural life of a new danger: the crowd. “The age we are entering will truly be the age of crowds”, prophesized in 1896 a book by Gustave Le Bon on the psychology of crowds, destined to become an instant worldwide success. But why is the crowd so suddenly becoming such a hot topic in the end of XIXth century intellectual life? Because it is perceived as a major threat. It is fear that brings crowds at the forefront of cultural and political concerns; and it is that very same fear that seems to open and promise an historical period of disorder, chaos and anarchy. Le Bon’s book bears witness to the disquieting power of human masses, which he sees as a prelude to the destruction of civilization by the unleashing of “those unconscious and brutal multitudes, appropriately qualified as barbarous.”[[3]](#footnote-3) But what upsets so much Le Bon and his conservative friends is what they fear as “the blind power of numbers”, in other words the development of democracy in the last two decades of the XIXth century, the progress of the workers’ movement and of socialism, as well as the social violence of the strikes and protest that may accompany them. Thus the project of founding the psychology of crowds as a science of human masses, able to decipher them in order to control them. Crowds are volatile and unpredictable: at the core of Le Bon’s project lies the perception of their instability and of the political dangers of the strange contagion – this is Le Bon’s own word and main concern – that sometimes happen to spread through them. Where does this contagin stem from?

Let us move now from Europe to America, and from the political stage to the economic sphere. At the turn of the XXth century, along with labour strikes, foreign wars and natural disasters, the most sensational events experienced and discussed by all classes of Americans were financial panics. To such a point that they triggered an epidemic of panic novels: more than 300 novels focusing on economic and financial disasters were published between 1870 and 1920, accompanying the massive crises that rocked Wall Street in 1893 and 1907.[[4]](#footnote-4) And to understand how these dangerously epidemic emotions worked, novels like Frank Norris’ *The Pit* (1903), Frederic Isham’s *Black Friday* (1904), Upton Sinclair’s *The Money Changers* (1907) of Theodore Dresiser’s *The Financier* (1912), among many others, quite spontaneously framed their narratives into those of crowd psychology. For crowd psychologists in Europe and panic novelist in America did share a common concern: both were fascinated by the contagious fear scattering over political masses here and market crowds there. And their questions, here and there, remained the same. At the dawn of mass society, in a time of major political, social and economic change, individuals were easily contaminated by fuzzy, diffuse and contagious forms of fear: how could an indefinable feeling of insecurity turn apparently autonomous individuals into scared and violent street or market mobs? How could a free-floating anxiety morph into collective fears?

This conversion of anxieties into fear is not an entirely new question in the long history of fear, if we believe the most comprehensive sum ever written on the subject by French historian Jean Delumeau.[[5]](#footnote-5) Studying fear over a long time frame, from the Middle Ages to the eve of the XIXth century, he remarks how difficult it proved for traditional European societies to fight over a long time with a free-floating anxiety, with no limits or definition, and how it then became necessary “to transform and fragment it into the distinct fear of something or someone.” The human mind continuously produces fear, Delumeau carries on saying, to avoid an unbearable anxiety. “In a long historical sequence of collective trauma, Western culture has tamed anxiety by naming it, that is by identifying, or even by fabricating specific fears.”[[6]](#footnote-6) And we still intuitively know what these fears were, as they still strangely haunt Western minds: the fear of war, invasion, plagues, but also the fear of God’s Wrath, and that universal fear of traditional Western societies, the fear of Satan and its numerous servants, heretics, witches or Jews.

**American nervousness, European insecurity**

So, this will be my first point here: what the study of the emergence of crowd psychology or this wave of panic novels at the turn of the century, as well as the long history of fear tell us is that, under certain historical circumstances, and particularly when major economic, social, political changes are occurring, states of undefined, fuzzy, free-floating anxiety can become contagious, to use Le Bon’s metaphor, and spread as collective fears among masses of individuals. We will come back to that.

But there is another element that characterises our current “age of anxiety”, and it is the fact that anxiety became at about the same time a mental pathology. Europe and America then saw the sudden eruption of new and strange diseases, the only causes of which seemed to be the entrance of civilization into modernity and the emergence of mass society. “A new crop of diseases has sprung up in America”, declared George Beard in his 1890 book *American Nervousness* about what was then called neurasthenia[[7]](#footnote-7). What were the roots of this “nervous exhaustion”, as he saw it? They can be defined, and I quote “by these five characteristics: steam power, the periodical press, the telegraph, the sciences … and the mental activity of women.”[[8]](#footnote-8) What is perfectly clear here is that neurasthenia is anxiety, triggered by technological, social and cultural change.

And if you follow me back to Europe and read with me the psychopathological literature of the time, you will also find the same diagnosis. There as well, in the last decades of the XIXth and the first of the XXth century, anxiety appears with the same acuity as a disease of the mind, arising from an unknown source as a feeling of indefinable insecurity, a fear without any object, to make a long story short.[[9]](#footnote-9) All of this will be summed up in Sigmund Freud’s definitions of what differentiates fear from anxiety, in his 1926 *Inhibition, Symptom, Anxiety*: there he coins anxiety as “expectant fear” and adding that “… it has an indeterminate nature and an absence of object; once it has found its object, the correct use of language changes its very name and replaces it with fear… Neurotic anxiety is anxiety before an object we do not know.”[[10]](#footnote-10) This will culminate in his *Civilisation and Its Discontents* in which he saw anxiety, lurking behind the universal Western feeling of guilt, as the main source of the malaise in modernity, to be found in the innumerable “possibilities of anxiety” in culture.[[11]](#footnote-11)

So allow me now to proceed, very briefly, to my second point. How can we, from what we have just learnt about the emergence of modern anxiety in our culture, how can we deal with the question of fear and anxiety in historical terms. What I think would be of a great interest from the point of view of history would be the construction, as an historical object, of the successive modes of presence of fear and anxiety in contemporary societies, of the machinery of their coexistence, and particularly of the systems of reciprocal conversion of one into the other. Which, I think, may open the following questions.

**Archaeology of anxiety: preconstructions, sediments, memory of fear**

And so the question: how, at which moment, in which circumstances, under the effect of which historical factors, does a nebula of diffuse, free-floating anxiety without any particular origin crystallise itself into fears about such and such a threat, such and such a danger? Historical examples come immediately to mind: how did the diffuse anxieties of the America of the Cold War unleash the fear of the “red peril” and the hunting down of communists orchestrated by Senator Joseph McCarthy? How did the mass unease in Germany in the aftermath of the First World War feed the rise of Nazism and along with it the fear of, and then the hatred of, the Jews? We can find a partial response in Hannah Arendt: inert masses of disorganised individuals without roots, who are joined only by a “terrifying negative solidarity”, represent a vast reservoir of stagnant anxieties for totalitarian propaganda to tap into and to channel. It knows, too, how to put the mass in motion (“to bring it to its melting point” says Canetti) in order to relieve the anxiety of each and substitute it with a sense of identity and a collective structure which each lacked but which all desired: the story of the conversion of mass anxiety into totalitarian terror.

In other words, all this comes down to seeing anxiety as free-floating narrative structures, partly submerged, largely undefined, void of subject and object but ready, when historical circumstances demand, or when events pave the way (even if the Reichstag must be burnt down), to rise to the surface and convert themselves into discourses of fear, bristling with threats and enemies. So we see that anxiety, as discourse, is the pre-construct of the formulation of fear, a virtual fear, latent, a kind of dormant discursive cell awaiting an object and an agent.

And another question: how, conversely, is it that fears which seemed solidly embedded and destined to last, instead disperse in the grey zone of indistinct anxieties? And in consequence, in which way does anxiety carry within itself a vague, unconscious memory of the fears and traumas which preceded it and fed it? What has become of the fears of the war, of the bomb, of the great epidemics, of economic depression? Great fears deposit discursive sediments in the collective memory which anxiety preserves. Anxiety is the memory domain of smouldering, filtered fears which have not been totally obliterated. These fears bury themselves there, become blunted, unrecognisable, “blanched”, empty, schematic, but they never completely disappear. Anxiety, and the discourses which make them materialise – vague noises, rumours without foundation, urban legends, worrying news, moral panics, conspiracy theories, alarmist predictions, prophecies of evil, silences which say too much… – are at one and the same time the ghosts of fears past and the harbingers of fears to come.

And so one last question, perhaps, to finish with, linked to what has gone before: how can the discourse of anxiety, this unconscious memory, this floating recollection of ancient fears, how can it again become the cradle, the discursive matrix of new fears which attach themselves to new dangers presented to them by history? We look once again to North American history: there were certainly witch hunts before the one undertaken by Senator McCarthy in the 1950s. There was one at the end of the 17th century in puritan New England, others all through the 19th century against various religious sects, and another at the beginning of the 20th century against the socialist threat. There are still others which are taking place before our eyes and there will be more to come, against other enemies of the homeland, other conspirators, other terrorists, other perils, real or imaginary.

“Against these dangers, in these times of uncertainty, I am going to build a wall, a big wall, a great wall. And you know what, people? It won’t cost a dime. That’s the beauty of it. Others are going to pay for it. Believe me: I can handle that. The only thing you have to do is vote for me. And why not try that?”….

“Others are going to pay to relieve us from our fears.” Why is such nonsense, freely adapted here from actual speeches from the current US presidential campaign, even possible? Because of the relation of language to memory, because discourse is the social framework of collective memory: these arguments are not new, they sound quite familiar. They pre-existed the current election, as empty discursive structures ready to be used as soon as the political circumstances able to awake them and the voice eager to utter them could be found. Obviously, fear comes in historical cycles, inscribed in discourse, at the centre of which fears and anxieties circulate and change places with each other, metamorphosing. It is that, I believe, which is the true subject of a history of our fears and anxieties.

For what is the history of anxiety, if not that of fears which are remembered once they have been forgotten?

1. If we limit this enumeration to just some of the most notable books and forget scores of articles, see, particularly: Frank Furedi, *The Culture of Fear. Risk-Taking & the Morality of Low Expectation* (London: Continuum, 1997); Mike Davis, *The Ecology of Fear. Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998); Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear. Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Jacob Levy, *The Multiculturalism of Fear* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Corey Robin, *Fear. The History of a Political Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Haynes Johnson, *The Age of Anxiety. McCarthyism to Terrorism* (New York: Harcourt, 2005); Rachel Pain & Susan J. Smith, *Fear: Critical Geopolitics & Everyday Life* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Paul Virilio, *L’administration de la peur* (Paris: Textuel, 2010); Sean P. Hier (ed), *Moral Panic & the Politics of Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Michael Laffan and Max Weiss (eds), *Facing Fear. The History of an Emotion in Global Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); *Fear: Across the Disciplines*, [Jan Plamper](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=dp_byline_sr_book_1?ie=UTF8&text=Jan+Plamper&search-alias=books&field-author=Jan+Plamper&sort=relevancerank) & [Benjamin Lazier](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=dp_byline_sr_book_2?ie=UTF8&text=Benjamin+Lazier&search-alias=books&field-author=Benjamin+Lazier&sort=relevancerank) (eds), Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012; Marc Augé, *Les nouvelles peurs* (Paris: Payot, 2013). A couple of other books, though, do deal with the role of anxiety in contemporary psychic and social life, but in a more limited way than the central part we intend to see it play in this project. See particularly: Joanna Bourke, *Fear. A Cultural History* (London: Virago, 2005); and Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006). ). Renata Saleci’s book, *On Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 2004), written in a clinical perspective, is of limited interest from a historical point of view. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. W. H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety. A Baroque Eclogue*, Princeton (NJ), Princeton University Press, 2017 (1947). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gustave Le Bon, *Crowds : A Study of the Popular Mind*, Digireads.com, 2008 (1896). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On this unprecedented wave of panic novels in American literature, see: David A. Zimmerman, *Panic! Markets, Crises & Crowds in American Fiction,* Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jean Delumeau, *La peur en Occident*, Paris, Fayard, 1978. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibidem*, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. G. Beard, *American Nervousness. Its Causes & Consequences.A Supplement to Nervous Exhaustion (Neurasthenia),* New-York, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1881. Also see: Philip P. Wiener, “G. M. Beard & Freud on American Nervousness », *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Apr., 1956), pp. 269-274 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibidem*, p. vi. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. As for instance defined in Pierre Janet’s work, *De l’angoisse à l’extase*, 2 vol. , Paris, Alcan, 1926-1928, vol. 2, p. 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sigmund Freud, *op. cit*., p.77. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “The sense of guilt is fundamentally nothing other than a topical variety of anxiety […] (Anxiety) is present in some way behind all symptoms, though sometimes it seizes control of the whole of consciousness, while at other times it is completely hidden, so that we have to speak of an unconscious anxiety […] or of ‘possibilities of anxiety’.” Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, New York, Penguin Classics, 2002 (1930), p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)