



Europe and its Fears in the Age of Anxiety: Historiography and Perspectives

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1. Introduction

In 1946, Albert Camus wrote a series of contributions to *Combat Magazine* titled *Neither Victims nor Executioners*. These articles were a profound reflection on Europe's war scars and the risk of a third World War: "The seventeenth century" - he wrote - "was the century of mathematics, the eighteenth that of the physical sciences, and the nineteenth that of biology. Our twentieth century is the century of fear" (Camus 1946: 257).

It is a widespread public perception that the so called "Society of Fear" started on September 11, 2001, but it was after the attacks of Madrid, in 2004, that "American fear" also invaded Europe, tragically giving the full significance to the expression coined by the editor of *Le Monde*, Jean-Marie Colombani: *Nous sommes tous Américains* (Colombani 2001: 1). Therefore, concepts such as "Risk Society" or "Uncertainty Society" have ceased to be topics for discussions restricted to intellectual or academic circles and, amplified by the media, a debate of global proportions has started (Rosenwein and Cristiani 2018: 110-120).

However, "Americans did not discover terrorism after September 11, 2001". Terrorism (and fear) "came to the forefront of American consciousness, and pop culture, in the 1990s" (Kavadlo 2015: 2). According to David Lyon, "9/11 was apocalyptic in the proper sense of the term": the attacks on the Twin Towers have simply revealed a generalised sense of uncertainty, anxiety and vulnerability that was already present in Western collective sensibility (Lyon 2003: 17-18).

Although our age appears pervaded by a plethora of fears, this dimension is not at all exclusive of what has been called the "postmodern condition" (Lyotard: 1979). Social fears have always existed, and they have emerged whenever human beings and their communities have been forced to face catastrophic events, threats or risk situations, both real and perceived. For instance, Lucien Febvre very effectively summarised the dominant feeling in Europe in the sixteenth century: *Peur toujours, peur partout* (Febvre 1942: 380). Fear is a primary emotion deeply rooted in every aspect of human existence: it is "the original sin of life." - wrote Guglielmo Ferrero - "Every living creature capable of moving is frightening and cause fright" (Ferrero 1947: 318).

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Is it therefore possible to study individual and collective fears with a historiographical approach, that is to rationalise something so pervasive but at the same time so irrational and elusive as emotions? This same question was posed by Febvre in *Sensibility and History*, an essay published in 1941, where he complained of a serious lack of historical investigation in this field: “We have no history of Love” - he denounced - “We have no history of Death. We have no history of Pity, or of Cruelty. We have no history of Joy” (Febvre 1973: 12-26). Febvre was certainly not the first to raise the question of writing a history of feelings. From Herodotus to Thucydides and Polybius, historians have always dealt with emotions. However, it was only from the nineteenth century, with the emergence of cultural history approach, that some of them, together with art historians or sociologists tried to understand the role that they have played in the historical process.

The most significant contributions came in the twentieth century. In 1919, Johan Huizinga, in *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, compared the mentality of the ancients with the modern one, emphasising that during the premodern era “all the things seemed more clearly marked than to us” and “the contrast between suffering and joy, between adversity and happiness, appeared more striking” (Huizinga 1924: 9-10). In the early 1930s, George Lefebvre published his works on the Great Fear of 1789 (Lefebvre 1932, 1934), describing how France “became gripped by an almost universal fear, shared by authorities and citizens alike” and most of all showing that “fear bred fear” (Rudé 1973: x). In his already cited essay, Febvre considered Huizinga’s study, and explicitly mentioned Henri Berr’s approach based on historical psychology “of peoples and individuals”. At the same time, he also declared that he had been influenced by the psychological theories that Henri Wallon had included in an article published in the *Encyclopédie française* (Müller 1996, Neri 1996, Rosenwein 2001).

Febvre would deal with this issue few years later (Febvre 1956) in a review dedicated to a study by Jean Halpérin focused on social security, which indirectly confirmed that “every conception of insecurity embraces a notion of what security is” (Vail 1999: 5). Except Ferrero and Bibó (Bibó 1997, 2015), in the following decades, history of emotions remained matter for medieval and modern historians that analysed this topic in biographical research, or in studies focused on collective behaviours. This search area would have been finally expanded from the mid-1970s, within studies centred on ‘private’ dimension, family or affective dynamics, and gender relations or on history of mentality and sensibility (Ariès 1975, 1977, 1983; Delumeau 1978, 1983; Corbin 1982; Vovelle 1983).

It was in the mid-1980s that Peter and Carol Stearns presented a new perspective based on the definition of *emotionology* (Stearns P.N. and C.Z. 1985: 813). This approach had been influenced by Norbert Elias (Elias 2010) as also as by sociological and psychological studies published in the 1970s (DeMause 1975). It was on these bases that the Stearns published their books on *Anger* and *Jealousy* (Stearns C.Z and P.N. 1986, Stearns P.N. 1989), which were followed by a series of individual and collective studies (Stearns P.N. 1999, 2006; Stearns P.N. and Haggerty 1991, Stearns P.N. and Lewis 1999). The panorama was enriched with further contributions and perspectives. *Psychohistory*, for example, was the

dominant approach of Peter Gay's inquiry into the life of bourgeoisie of Nineteenth century Europe (Gay 1984-1996).

The definitive 'institutionalization' of the history of emotions would have come in the 1990s. During this phase, in addition to English and French literature, many other contributions were published in different languages (Placanica 1993; Vegetti Finzi 1995; Rasini 2011; Frevert 2000, 2009, 2011, 2014; Borrero 2013). The state of the art today is very different from that highlighted by Febvre. In fact, "In the mid-twentieth century" - has rightly noted Plamper - "Febvre described the 'history of feelings' as almost 'virgin territory' [...]. More than fifty year later, at the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth-first century, this 'terra incognita' is being measured and mapped, claims are being staked out" (Plamper 2012: 74).

2. Sources and Approach

What is fear? Is it a physiological and psychological response to external *stimuli* or *vice versa* is it mainly a cultural product? And how can it be studied? In his contribution previously mentioned, Febvre provided some examples of sources that could be useful for the historian: "We have documents on *moral conduct* [...]; *artistic documents* [...]; and literary documents" (Febvre 1973). Another "fruitful approach to the history of emotions" - as Max Weiss recently noted - "has been the philological" (Weiss 2012: 1). More in general, scholars have used other diversified sources such as diaries, wills, memoirs, personal writings, literature, artistic production, and philosophical/theological works.

Since fear is both instinctive and cultural, it is of great importance that historians would not be conditioned by visions or overly restrictive patterns. At the same time, the emotional lexicon must therefore be sought wherever possible and with an open approach towards contributions of other disciplines without however being influenced by them (Plamper 2012: 33). Nevertheless, the historian should not only look for the presence of sentiments but also their absence. As Barbara Rosenwein has pointed out, historians must also be capable to read and interpret metaphors, irony, even - especially above all - silences (Rosenwein 2010).

A major role in the creation and diffusion of collective fears, especially for contemporary historians, has been played by media. This aspect has been widely studied from different perspectives. In *The Culture of Fear*, for instance, Frank Furedi provided a significant account of the increasing importance of the British media (Furedi 1997). From the perspective of the historian, the relevant role of the media in the creation of collective fears has roots that go back to the early stages of the mass society, such as the satirical radio broadcast aired in 1926 from the BBC's Edinburgh studios, that described an imaginary strike degenerating and caused disquiet and panic among many British listeners (Bourke 2005: 168-178).

Fear can be also fuelled by what has been called *shock economy*, that is "corporations and politicians who exploit the fear and disorientation [...] to push

through economic shock therapy” (Klein 2007: 25-26). This aspect is closely related to the so-called “Politics of Fear”. By “political fear” Corey Robin means “a people’s felt apprehension of some harm to their collective well-being - the fear of terrorism, panic over crime, anxiety about moral decay - or the intimidation wielded over men and women by governments of groups” (Robin 2004 : 2). “Politics of Fear” also refers to another crucial aspect, that is the connection between Power and Fear. As Guglielmo Ferrero wrote in 1942: “Power is the supreme manifestation of the fear that man does to himself, despite the efforts to get rid of it” (Ferrero 1942: 38). Even the relationship between Power and Fear has ancient roots. For example, in the *Palazzo Pubblico* in Piazza del Campo in Siena there are the Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s frescos named *The Allegory of Good and Bad Government*. They date back to the first half of the fourteenth century and describe the well-governed town as a prosperous and happy community. In these frescos, the presence of an angel can be noticed. This angel, which protects from above the city of Siena, is the embodiment of *Securitas* (Security) and holds in his right hand a scroll on which one can read: *Senza paura ognuom franco camini* (“without fear every man may travel freely”). The message is clear: in a well-governed town, there is no place for fear (Boucheron 2013) because an efficient government provides security to its citizens.

Fear is also an extraordinary political weapon: politicians or governments can inflate and use collective fears as a means of social control, to divert public opinion from other issues, or to strengthen social cohesion against a real (or imaginary) threat or an internal or external enemy. Recently, Ruth Wodak has studied the phenomena of right-wing populism by showing the ways in which these parties “successfully create fear and legitimise their policy proposals [...] with an appeal to the necessities of *security*” (Wodak 2015: 5). Moreover, as Carlo Ginzburg has noted, the Power itself can inspire “Fear, Reverence, [and] Terror” (Ginzburg 2008 and 2017). At the same time, Power has not only this mighty aspect. According to Ferrero, in fact, the link between Power and Fear is bidirectional: Power inspires fear but can also experience fear (Ferrero 1942: 17) and this is particularly true for totalitarian and authoritarian regimes.

Other questions arise: which social strata to study? Dealing with the history of social fears in recent times in Western Europe, especially after the end of the second World War, means, to a large extent, study the sensibility and mentality of “that vast social universe constituted by the different strata of the middle class” (Castronovo 2004 : 7). Middle class is traditionally sensitive to uncertainty (Mulholland 2012), and “fear of falling” is probably the main phobia among both the working and middle classes nowadays (Ehrenreich 1989).

All these aspects confirm that Fear is a multidimensional sentiment that requires interrogating and confronting a variety of approaches, sources and social actors. However, this is not enough. Each of these elements must be studied in connection with “the world of experience and with institutions” and each information must also be contextualised in terms of time: “Was what people in 1970s called ‘fear’ the same thing as it was in the 1870s?” - asked Joanna Bourke echoing Huizinga’s warnings - “Probably not” (Bourke 2005: 6). Moreover, each emotion must be also contextualised on the “geographic-cultural” level. It is

unquestionable that large part of contributions on fears are Eurocentric, Western-European centred or American-centred: even though from this point of view things are gradually changing, some recent studies have underlined this “unmistakable lacuna in the history of emotions” (Weiss 2012: 8).

3. Contemporary Europe and its fears

What are the roots of contemporary fears? Secondly, can we somehow advance a sort of periodization of them? According to many interpretations, *La Belle Époque* marks the apogee of European expansion, the age of the triumph of science and technology and it has been described as an age of great optimism. However, it is precisely in that phase of great transformations that some ancient collective fears grew, and the germs of new alarming apprehensions spread out. So, even though this could be interpreted as a paradox, the roots of contemporary fears must be sought during the so-called *Belle Époque* (Silei 2008).

During this phase, some fears changed, evolved and became ‘modern’. One example is the coming of the antisemitism based on social Darwinism, racism and conspiracy theories that emerged alongside the ‘old’ antisemitism based on religious considerations or blood accusation. Quite often, to use Delumeau’s words, a single fear gave rise to a “procession of fears”, triggering collective hysteria or generating craze or ‘moral panic’ epidemics (Hillgartner and Bosk 1988). Sometimes, fears left the impression of disappearing, but then, like a karstic river, they re-emerged some time later.

In order to periodise fear, we should distinguish between ‘conjunctural’ fears and ‘long-term’ fears. Many of these ‘conjunctural fears’ are linked to the most relevant turning points of the twentieth century: the two World Wars and the Bolshevik Revolution. After October 1917, in particular, the “spectre” that haunted Europe since mid-nineteenth century became tangible, spreading the fear of chaos and so generating the first and second “Red Scare”. To these events should be added the impact of the main economic crises. In the interwar years, 1929 crisis, together with the fear of Bolshevism would have fatal consequences for some fragile European liberal democracies such as Italy and Germany. After 1945, other crises acted as trigger factors of fears: firstly, the economic instability caused by the end of the Bretton Woods as a consequence of the so-called “Nixon shock”, then the two Oil Shocks of the 1970s, and the effects determined by 2008 crisis.

In addition to these great historical, fault lines, some ‘long-term fears’ should also be considered. For example: fears related to the coming of the mass society, to the effects on social stratification of the changes in the production system (from fordism to post-fordism), the changing of dominant economic paradigms (from keynsianism to neoliberalism and flexible capitalism), the dramatic consequences of the Information Technology revolution and the process of globalization.

Among the long-term fears, probably the most persistent one is the idea of the decline of Western civilization. This *malaise* is strictly connected to the end of

Eurocentrism and often associated with concepts as decadence and degeneration that, even in this case, emerged during the *Belle Époque*. After the first post-war, this feeling of uncertainty was so deep that seemed to pervade every area of knowledge, as evidenced in *The Decline of the West* by Oswald Spengler or in Thomas Mann's considerations on the crisis of modernity.

Another relevant turning point was the second post-war. One year before the end of the most terrible conflict in human history, Francis Bacon painted *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*. This work, that symbolised the human condition, but above all was a grotesque and disturbing depiction of the horrors of the Second World War and a symbol of its legacy, shocked the public (Miles 2010). In 1947, Wystan Hugh Auden reflected on the decline of Western culture after the end of the war, underlying that "the anxieties exacerbated by wartime" did not "evaporate", but remained, along with a sense of profound emptiness, and influenced the post-war years (Jacobs 2011: xv).

The Second World War brought as legacy a new and terrifying fear: that of a nuclear Armageddon. Confirming what Jean Delumeau had observed for some premodern fears, the fear of a world war fought with atomic weapons re-emerged periodically, sometimes reaching dramatic peaks. Even though, paradoxically, just the balance of terror would have guaranteed to Europe decades of peace, there is no doubt that the atomic age and the climate of the Cold War multiplied the sense of anxiety, fear and paranoia. There was not only the 'classic' fear of the enemy - external or domestic - but also a deep concern that resulted in the realization that a weapon as powerful as the atomic bomb could wipe out not only a nation, but also the entire human race. Under the ashes, the fear of a nuclear holocaust, the nightmare of a communist revolution or invasion and all the others fears related to military, political, and economic confrontation between the two superpowers would persist until the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

The extraordinary growth phase that started in the 1950s apparently inaugurated a new season of confidence and optimism. A crucial role in reassuring and protecting European population was played on one side by the active role of the state in the economy and on the other side by the Welfare State. Keynesianism and Welfare State provided full employment, social insurance, health, homes, education and culture, social protection to the weaker sectors of societies from the cradle to the grave (Urwin 1989: 152). More in general, these policies, at least until the mid-1970s crisis, proved to be an excellent instrument for redistributing wealth, and favouring social upward mobility.

During the Golden Age, Europeans seemed to forget the trauma of mass insecurity (Judt 2008). Indeed, the second post-war years were crucial, because during this phase, besides the 'Americanization' of Western European popular culture, there was also a sort of process of 'Americanization' of collective fears. Moreover, even the "Glorious Thirty Years" of Western civilization had their own fears (Greif 2015, Immerwahr 2016). The Fear of "the Other", in its various declinations (ethnic, moral, political, gender) and fear of any deviant behaviour, for instance, remained and periodically emerged. The common denominator of many of these fears was the 'classic' search for a scapegoat considered a threat for societal values (Cohen 1972, Goode and Ben Yehuda 1994). Particularly interesting

was the fear of juvenile criminal gangs or moral panic against the first youth countercultures (Teddy Boys, Mods, Rockers and so on) in the 1950s and 1960s.

After the watershed of the mid-1970s, other fears emerged or reappeared: fear of crisis and social downgrading, fear of crime and of the spread of drugs, fear of internal terrorism, then, in the 1980s the irrational fear of being infected by AIDS, immediately labelled the “gay plague”, for instance (Alcabes 2009, Mnookin 2011). More recently, although the improvement in living conditions determined by scientific and technological advancement, even fears and distrusts related to modernization re-emerged, often blend with conspiracy theories or denialism of various kinds.

4. Conclusions

According to some pessimistic interpretations, “the hundred years after 1900 were without question the bloodiest century in history” (Ferguson 2006, Conquest 1999, Todorov 2001). At the same time, the twentieth century was a century of impressive development and extraordinary economic and social changes. After 1989 and 1991 events, the fragile balance achieved after the end of World War II has been broken with relevant consequences on the ideological level (Stone 2014).

At the turn of the Millennium, also those views based on the triumph of the Western civilization against the Communist threat and on Fukuyama’s “End of History” paradigm have come to an end (Fukuyama 1989 and 1992). In this “post-American world” (Zakaria 2008) fear and anxiety have risen, multiplied by new internal and international scenarios. Western society is now pervaded by a vague sense of uncertainty. Paraphrasing Pascal’s *Pensées*, Nicolas Baverez attributed this widespread *malaise* to the sensation of taking a road leading towards the unknown (Baverez 2008). Furthermore, our ‘liquid society’ is increasingly obsessed with prevention (Bauman 2006). We all aspire to zero risk, even if we all know that zero risk is a nonsense (Sofsky 2005, Beck 2007, Curbet 2008). The paradoxical consequence is that “in seeking to avoid fear we may have become more fearful than necessary. Our emotional vulnerability has increased” (Stearns 2006: ix).

What solutions, then? Fear can paralyse societies but can also be a powerful driving force for positive change (Boucheron and Robin 2015); in other words, it can be both a factor of decline or progress. A possible antidote to the multitude of fears that seems to surround post-modern human condition in the West comes from History itself. In 1930, Sigmund Freud pointed out that “civilised man has exchanged a portion of his possibilities of happiness for a portion of security”, thus underlying the intimate (and delicate) connection between security and freedom. This aspect is of crucial importance. During an historical phase characterised by a prolonged state of fear and anxiety, the main risk for a community is opting for give up liberty for security. Historicise past and present fears, can help to understand, overcome them and maybe to avoid this risk. As Jean Delumeau has argued, we must remember that “throughout a community’s history, fears change [...] but Fear remains”, and that “despite these threats, at least in the West, we

are privileged. Our ancestors were far more afraid than we are. But, by reducing the threats they feared, we have created new ones which must not be neglected". The obsession with security it is not a desirable way to live: "Man's fate is to live in a certain concern, because the counterpart of human freedom is the risk" (Delumeau 1993: 17 and 23).

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