A Short Archaeology of the New Fear

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The Belgian cultural philosopher Lieven De Cauter has written extensively on the emergence of the capsular civilisation, in which public space is divided into monitored and enclosed, secure enclaves (gated communities, shopping malls, theme parks, camps, ghettos). In this article he makes an initial attempt at analysing the new fear upon which this capsularization is based. Is it a frightening but fleeting hallucination, or does collective fear suggest a genuine danger?

'Freedom and fear are at war, and there will be no quick and easy end to this conflict.'[1]

Collective fear is a large, partly invisible continent that manifests itself throughout entire epochs. In other words, fear is a historical constellation, often to a large extent subconscious or repressed, that defines the consciousness of groups and entire societies, yet it is also to a significant degree in its turn defined by facts, rumours, moods, cultural expressions, religious tenets or practices, customs, social rituals, and of course political manipulations.

But first: what is fear? Fear is a signal that communicates to a living organism that it may be in danger. Fear is one of the most important instruments to guarantee the survival of an individual member of a species, and therefore of the species itself. For this reason, fear is catalogued as an affect that is closely linked to the survival instinct. Fear, perhaps along with aggression and the mating drive, is one of the most instinctive impulses in any living being. Therefore fear is primarily a biological rather than a psychological phenomenon. But that is not the whole story, of course. Fear moves inwards. One might even say that fear is the basis for the human capacity to think. That is perhaps going a bit far, yet 'if not strong then be smart' is a basic motto for a timorous species (just as antelopes and rabbits scrupulously live by the maxim 'if not strong then be fast'). Humans are fearful animals. And who could blame them? Fear is a survival instinct, in humans as well, although they are a species without instinct and therefore compelled to be free and unfettered. In this sense, the hypothesis could be turned on its head: humans are a fearful species precisely because of their intelligence. When one is constantly able to perceive all the possibilities and impossibilities, all the dangers and risks, one is quite likely to become nervous, timorous or just plain afraid.

All fear is, ultimately, the fear of death. Yet only humans feel death to be unnatural and conduct their lives in a negation of death. The huge numbers of traces we leave behind and which we collectively call products of culture are all, in their focus on durability (bronze, marble, parchment), rebellions against finitude. The entire culture consists in the incessant establishment, re-establishment and handing down of traces, of monuments that 'are more eternal than bronze'. Culture, in this sense, is a negation of or symbolic victory over death. One might call it 'immortality drive': a drive that manifests itself at the level of the individual as a quest for fame (in order to become 'immortal') and at the level of the species as the need to maintain and pass on the meanings, the world of signs that define the uniqueness of the human race as a species.

Allthough fear originates in the survival instinct, it is a poor counsellor – certainly in its more intense form, which we call panic. The more intense the fear, the poorer counsel fear provides. And once the suspicion has been aroused in the fearful that he has fallen prey to a poor counsellor, that is precisely the point at which fear risks turning into panic: a fearful person loses control, because he is afraid of his own fear. In that sense, we should indeed be afraid of our fear. [2] Panic attacks are horrible. 'It's really a bad trip, you know.' A 'bad trip' is slang for a hallucination. A hallucination is being awake and yet dreaming (this can be pleasant in a state of intoxication, even blissful – the artificial paradises of Baudelaire and the like), but a waking dream usually turns sooner or later into a nightmare, as is the case in schizophrenia, paranoia, et cetera. And that might well be the case: humanity is 'having a bad trip'.

We awake in a hallucinatory world, and however much we rub our eyes, we cannot drive away the bad dream: the twenty-first century looks bleak – somewhat spine-chilling, in fact. This is why we can speak of a new fear [3] . Texts and books are being published about it. Let us attempt to chart the continent of the new fear and produce a brief, rough sketch of it, more as a 'geology of fear' than as a genealogy of it. Or as a short archaeology, in the sense of the science of strata. Let us begin with the lowest stratum in this continental drift.

1. Demographic or Ecological Fear

My hypothesis is that the deepest layer of our new collective fear, barely detectable at the surface, is the almost bio-sociological awareness, at the level of the species, that the world is getting so overpopulated that we are as a species reaching the limits of our biotope, the Earth. A fact of the twenty-first century is that nine billion people will have to survive on this planet by 2050. This awareness results more in a sort of unease than in a knowledge. Sometimes it is banal: the morning rush-hour traffic jams. But the extraordinary succession of problems is not at all banal: shortages in drinking water, threats to bio-diversity, global warming, rising sea levels, growing aggression, waves of migration, growing poverty, et cetera. Although warnings were issued as far back as 30 years ago (especially the report of the Club of Rome in 1972) about the demographic explosion, it is still not an issue of everyday discussion nor, sadly, a top priority for the world's political leaders. The ecological, social, economic and political consequences of overpopulation are incalculable, because of the many interactions among the various factors. I have dubbed this constellation 'the permanent catastrophe'. [4] As a poor counsellor, fear might very well come to play a significant role in the approach to global problems. At the same time, ecological or demographic fear might also push through the signal that humanity is in genuine danger and that we must therefore take action. For the moment, it seems unlikely that sufficient energy will be devoted to this. The Kyoto accords getting torpedoed is a bad sign. One important consequence of the on-going demographic explosion is migration. And here we might just touch on the most volcanic aspect of the new fear. From the deepest strata of the demographic/ecological fear, migrants represent, within the constellation of the new fear, an all-too-visible bone of contention, personifying unease about an all-too-rapidly changing world.

2. Dromophobia

Just as invisible as demographic fear is the pressure exerted by the third Industrial Revolution (a term no longer in use, because the information-technology revolution seems to have acquired a semi-permanent character). Technological changes are so swift and so drastic, the acceleration they generate is so infernal, that people are kept in a constant state of subliminal fear, a state we identify as stress. The acceleration of our lives is, from first to last, a by-product of our technological extensions, of our media. Yet are we afraid of technology? At first glance, it seems the era of technophobia is over. Unfortunately, perhaps: there is hardly any resistance to technology anymore, or even criticism. An almost unquestioned sympathy predominates, a slavish adoration of technology, expressed in the thousands of consumer goods we purchase compulsively. We are dependent on information technology: anyone unplugged cannot function in our new, much-vaunted information society. Yet perhaps this new 'technophilia' is nothing more than a latent fear of falling behind on the acceleration. One might call it the fear of acceleration: *dromophobia*.

3. Economic Fear

Neoliberal capitalism has produced a society of winners and losers. The dismantling of the welfare state has generated an unprecendented dualization of society, a division between haves and have-nots. The fear of losing prosperity is enormous. Nothing is certain anymore: job security, social security, health insurance, pension schemes are all in jeopardy. The celebrated flexibilization not only forces us to be flexible, it makes us fragile. One might call this stratum of our new collective fear economic fear – the fear of a loss of security. We miss the family affection of the welfare state, and our house, our household (*oikos*), is no longer secure. This fear can be seen as a problem of luxury, but that does not make it any less real. 'Privilege engenders fear': our privileged position and our unprecedented standard of living turns us into fearful bourgeois. The dualization of our society is made most visible by and is projected onto the large groups of migrants who are increasingly populating our cities. This brings us, as mentioned earlier, to the most volcanic stratum of our new fear.

4. Xenophobia

Xenophobia is, literally, fear of foreigners. I make no pretensions of presenting here an instant solution to the issue of racism and xenophobia, but the frictions associated with migrations are a historic and sociological, or even anthropological, phenomenon, just as, conversely, all complex cultures are products of mixing and not of purity – from philosophy, which had Egyptian astrology as one of its ingredients, to the oh-so-native potato, which comes from South America. However, the pace at which the West, and especially Western cities, are having to cope with increasingly large groups of migrants is causing a sense of alienation and fear. For many people, it is very difficult to live with the fact that the street or the school that was once 'theirs' has become 'foreign'. I believe an entirely new kind of education is required to learn to live with this; political correctness, which immediately dismisses any expression of unease as racism and xenophobia, makes any therapy for this deep alienation impossible. This alienation is of course dangerous, because it can indeed lead to xenophobic movements and parties such as the Front National in France, the Vlaams Blok in Flanders and the Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF) in the Netherlands. Yet a problem does exist. All the more because the migrants are alienated as well – what is the identity of a second- or third-generation migrant? – and have great difficulty in establishing an image of their own, with the result that sections of the migrant population, primarily young people, are poorly socialized, create trouble, make neighbourhoods unsafe, et cetera. Although the time is definitely past when such problems could be dismissed as racist fabrications, one cannot deny that our fear of migrants is the fear of our own migration or

mutation, of the changing of our own street, our own city, our own culture into a multicultural, eclectic, chaotic culture. The call for 'integration', which is sounding increasingly hollow (or, as with the ban on veils in schools, could even be counterproductive) is based on a fear of disintegration. I suspect that we shall have to learn to live with this disintegration; the era of the homogeneous civil society (symbolized by the uniform custom-made suit) is definitely over. We have arrived at a post-civil situation. And that brings us to the fifth stratum of the new fear.

5. Agoraphobia or Political Fear

The disintegration of the state is perceptible not just at the macro level, where individual states are losing importance because of the globalization of the economy and the formation of supranational entities, but also at the micro level: on the street, the monopoly on violence of the police is increasingly being challenged by an often diffuse aggression or simply acute violence. Add litter, vandalism and decay and you have all the ingredients for a new agoraphobia, a fear of the *agora* (the public space). Violence reaches into our sitting rooms through the evidently unstoppable tide of ever more violent action movies. Fear and aggression are increasingly exploited as commercially profitable forms of stimulation and enjoyment. Perhaps this oft-lamented explosion of violence in our media and visual culture is nothing more than a practice exercise for our new fear.

It cannot be denied: our world is becoming more chaotic. This tendency toward chaos can partly be ascribed to the increasingly complex structure of our society. The network society – just think of the World Wide Web – is absolutely not hierarchical and ordered, but rather fickle, 'rhizomatic'. The new imperial world order conceived by the American think tank Project for the New American Century (PNAC) and being implemented by the Bush administration plays upon this increasingly chaotic world and the disintegration of states.[5] And this brings us to the very latest fear: the fear of terrorism.

6. Fear of Terrorism

On the one hand, disillusionment with a globalization that has for the most part passed them by and bitterness within Islamic communities about the Middle East policy of the United States have created fertile ground for terrorism. On the other hand, the hegemonic claims of the United States in general and the American war industry in particular require a strong perceived enemy. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Bush Sr. gave the 'war on drugs' a try, but now the time is ripe for the real coup. Bush Jr.'s 'war on terrorism' is intended to bring about nothing less than a state of emergency, within America as well as on a planetary scale – within America through the curtailment of civil rights (Patriot Act), media manipulations, outright lies or censorship, outside America through the obliteration of the whole post-war system of international law, symbolized by the United Nations. This state of emergency is further demonstrated by refusing to recognize the International Court of Justice in The Hague, pulling out of the Kyoto accords and installing camps all over the world that are outside any legal jurisdiction, of which Camp Delta at Guantanamo Bay is but the most well-known. In their famous report *Rebuilding America's Defenses* in 2000, the PNAC, whose members include American administration officials Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and Dick Cheney, wrote that their plans could not be implemented without, and I quote, 'a catalysing catastrophic event – a sort of new Pearl Harbor'. After 9-11, which must have been a godsend to them, they were finally able to implement their plans. What were these plans? The PNAC's objectives are unequivocal: achieving a ubiquitous military presence through a technologically revolutionized military; preventing the emergence of a competing superpower and waging preventive wars against any power that might threaten American interests. The best catalyst for the PNAC programme is fear. The American political scientist Benjamin Barber has since given the new America and the new imperial world order a particularly apt name: 'fear's empire'.[6]

Yet the state of emergency is sadly not a spectre that will vanish after the nightmare of the neo-conservative Bush administration; martial law is being imposed everywhere. The measures contemplated by the city authorities in Rotterdam to make the city 'liveable' again, namely by barring any new migrants and poor people (people under a certain income), because the city already has too many migrants and too few well-to-do citizens, are a sign of the times. The proposal is of course to a certain extent a consequence of the Pim Fortuyn effect and was in fact put forward by his party, Leefbaar Rotterdam ('Liveable Rotterdam') but it was approved by the entire city council – and knowing the Netherlands, this is surely not composed only of racists or extremists. Although it is a direct violation of the right of any citizen to choose his or her place of residence within a certain country, it cannot therefore simply be swept off the table as absurd. It shows that people, in this case a city administration, for the most part democrats wary of offending voters, feel compelled, correctly or not – that can be debated at length – to opt for drastic measures and are evidently prepared to carry them out as well. Such emergency measures are a sign that we find ourselves in a sort of state of emergency – or at least that we are moving in that direction faster than we had anticipated.

The world is becoming more inhospitable all the time, and thus we shall have to learn to live with our new collective fear. And we must take care not to use this as a poor counsellor, but rather as a signal to carefully examine the causes of the fear and to draw careful but resolute conclusions – not become paralyzed or panicked, for that, as everyone knows, is the most dangerous of all reactions in a situation of genuine danger. And there is, unfortunately, genuine danger.

Postscript: Futurology of an Ancient Anger

To be angry is to no longer be afraid. I can only hope that humanity will become angry and say 'no' to exploitation, to illegal wars, to crimes against international law, to limitations on free expression of opinion through the monopolization of the media (Murdoch, Berlusconi) or through outright lies and censorship (the Bush administration), to the curtailment of fundamental civil rights (the Patriot Act), to the ecological catastrophe we are headed for with open eyes, to poverty around the world, to the cynicism with which the New Imperial World Order is outfitting global neo-capitalism with its attendant political structure, in short to the state of emergency. We must stand up against 'the empire of fear'. Otherwise the battle between freedom and fear will indeed be long and difficult.

Lieven De Cauter is a philosopher, art historian, writer, and activist. He teaches philosophy of culture in Leuven, Brussels, and Rotterdam. He has published several books on contemporary art, experience and modernity, on Walter Benjamin and more recently on architecture, the city, and politics. His latest books include *The Capsular Civilization. On the City in the Age of Fear*; *Heterotopia and the city. Public space in a postcivil society,* co-edited with Michiel Dehaene; and *Art and Activism in the Age of Gloablization*, co-edited with Karel van Haesebrouck and Ruben De Roo. He was initiator of the Brussels Tribunal on the war in Iraq and is co-founder of the Platform for Liberty of Expression, which project fights the abuse of antiterrorism to crack down on activism. He was guest curator of *Hidden Cities*, with Michiel Dehaene, in *Visionary Power* of the Rotterdam Architectural Biennale and of *Decolonizing Architecture. Scenarios for the transformation of Israeli settlement*s, with Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti and Eyal Weisman, at Bozar in Brussels (2008).

Footnotes

1. The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, September 2002.
2. *Wij moeten bang zijn van onze angst* ('We should be afraid of our fear') is the title of a manuscript by Frank Vande Veire, an opinion piece inspired by 9-11.
3. A few examples: René Boomkens, *De angstmachine* (1996), and very recently Alain de Botton, *Status Anxiety* (2004) and Benjamin Barber, *Fear's Empire* (2003).
4. 'Die permanente Katastrophe. Thesen zur Globalisierung / The Permanent Catastrophe. Theories on Globalisation', in *48th International Short Film Festival Oberhausen*, cat. Oberhausen 2002. Longer version in Dutch: 'De permanente catastrofe', *De Witte Raaf*, no. 97, May–June 2002, p. 9–12.
5. See www.newamericancentury.org. See also www.brusselstribunal.org.
6. Benjamin Barber, *Fear's Empire: War, Terrorism, and Democracy*, New York / London 2003.

Tags

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