Refusing to Perform Fear

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In the Netherlands, the politicization and dramatization of fear is preventing people from seeing the real problems, according to sociologist Frank Furedi. It is high time we realize that this in fact has to do with an estrangement from our own identity, especially as it has developed since the 1960s. Furedi thus argues for a more future-oriented activism, in which we must ask ourselves what the Netherlands and Amsterdam in particular want to be in the future.

One of the interesting features of contemporary Western culture is the pervasive character of the discourse of fear. Whether you travel to New York, Berlin or Amsterdam, you are confronted with the *zeitgeist* of fear. To put it starkly, the stories that people tell you in bars, cafes and on the streets are far less about hope than about fear. Unlike hoping, fearing enjoys considerable cultural affirmation. When I arrive in Amsterdam I am soon warned about gangs of pick-pockets. On its website the Tourism Office warns visitors to beware of fake policeman who are out to rob them. Parents tell me that the city streets in the Netherlands are not safe for children anymore. And even friends who feel liberated from these very conventional conformist fears caution me to beware of opportunistic politicians who are out to scare the public with their politics of fear.

Of course the institutionalization of a discourse of fear through the issuing of health warnings, risk management or media alerts should not be interpreted as proof that the quantity of fears has increased. It merely indicates that fear serves as a frame through which we interpret a variety of experiences. Numerous catch phrases – politics of fear, fear of crime, fear of the future, fear factor – are testimony to its significance as a cultural idiom for interpreting experience. The usage or even over-usage of the term indicates that fear is not simply a reaction to a specific danger but a cultural metaphor for interpreting life. Politics has internalized this culture of fear. So political disagreements are often over which risk the public should worry about the most. That is why politics in Europe is dominated by debates about the fear of terror, the fear of asylum seekers, the fear of anti-social behaviour and crime, fears over children, fears about our culture, fear for the environment, fear about our health or fear of economic insecurity.

Although opportunist politicians often seek to politicize fear they are not the principal problem. The politics of fear could not flourish if it did not resonate so powerfully with today's cultural climate. Politicians cannot simply create fear from thin air. The reason why the politics of fear has such a powerful resonance is because of the unusually feeble sense of human agency that prevails in twenty-first century Europe. Contemporary society posits the idea that the defining characteristic of humanity is its vulnerability and the idealization of powerlessness that dominates public life.[1] This state of diminished agency disposes people to interpret events through the prism of anxiety and fear. And if vulnerability is indeed the defining feature of the human condition, we are quite entitled to fear everything.

The open advocacy of fear indicates that it has become a cultural metaphor for interpreting and representing the world around us. Indeed, in some circles fear is used as a form of affectation to signify a sensitivity to the many hidden perils facing people. 'I am really worried about my child surfing the Net' parents tell one another to display their

parental responsibility. To acknowledge fear is to demonstrate awareness. This self-conscious affectation does not mean that people are necessarily more scared than previously. It merely signals the idea that they ought to be. When one of my Dutch friends informs me that 'Geert Wilders really scares me', she is not simply making a political statement. Her acknowledgment of this fear represents a statement about her identity – she is the kind of person that finds Wilders scary. '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.' [2] That is why the promotion of fear has important implications for the constitution of identity. Through performing fear we indicate what kind of a person we are. So the acknowledgement of anxiety about the threat represented by Wilders serves to emphasize a psychic distance from those prejudiced and ignorant people who want to turn the clock back to the mythical good old days. Others adopt a different script. They fear that the Netherlands' Enlightenment values are under threat by misguided and dangerous multicultural policies. As far as they are concerned their public avowal of such concerns expresses a long overdue statement about something that until recently could not be said. That's the kind of people they are.

What distinguishes the Netherlands from many of its neighbours is not its internalization of a culture of fear but a tendency to communicate it in a usually dramatic and caricatured form. The dramatization of fear, particularly in relation to the domain of culture, has acquired a grotesque form among the populist right. Both Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh were consummate performers who sought to dramatize people's existential insecurity through cultivating the media. There is something utterly banal about the attempts of Theo van Gogh and Geert Wilders to produce shocking films. Through embracing the identity of 'I am here to shock and provoke' they went through the motion of producing a twenty-first-century version of an emptied-out medieval passion play. In a more enlightened era such infantile 'crying wolf' stories would remain on the margin of society. But many Dutch people could not resist the temptation to embrace the role of the righteously provoked. And in turn numerous politicians and public figures responded by issuing warnings about the dangerous consequences of showing these films. Their prophecy of a violent reaction by offended minorities can be seen as an invitation to the exercise of fearful protest. Many authors of anti-xenophobe counter narratives profess to be even more shocked than their populist opponents. If one was to take seriously their assessment of the threat posed by Wilders it would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Netherlands is going through a period that strongly resembles the final days of Weimar Germany.

This affectation of fear often signals a fatalistic sensibility towards the world. That is why the statement 'I am scared' is rarely followed by an indication of doing something about the object of fear. Worse still, the dramatization of fear influences our behaviour through encouraging us to be passive and anxious about the future. It promotes cynicism and confusion. It incites us to regard ourselves as victims of circumstances beyond our control instead of authors of our destiny. Instead of responding to chauvinist propaganda by developing a robust humanist progressive alternative, far too many people react by simply asserting their fears. Yet is it is crucial to rebel against the power of the fear entrepreneurs. One step in that direction is to understand the workings of the culture of fear.

Amsterdam's Uncertain Identity

Amsterdam, like most European cities, is not at ease with itself. Despite the fact that it is a relatively safe and secure urban environment, many people in Amsterdam perceive life through the prism of insecurity and fear. In recent years the low-grade fears associated with the management of individual insecurity have often become focused on concerns about cultural and community identity. It seems that since its inception, the War on Terror has had a greater cultural impact on the Netherlands than other Western societies. One illustration of this trend is the growth of public apprehension towards the Muslim presence in the country. A study carried out by Pew Global Attitudes suggests that the Netherlands is one of the most anti-Islamic countries in Europe, where a majority of the people view Muslims unfavourably. Unfavourable attitudes towards Muslims or immigrants are often symbolic of a more fundamental sense of disorientation about the world. Public attitudes towards immigrants are often shaped by concerns to do with cultural and community identity. Such sentiments are underpinned by concerns about cultural security and values. That's why it is not surprising that anxieties about the integration of immigrants into Dutch society coincide with growing disenchantment with the EU. [3]

One of the inevitable consequences of the War on Terror was to raise questions about what defined Western culture and society. Former President Bush raised this issue poignantly when he asked 'Why Do They Hate Us'? The very posing of this question conveyed a sense of surprise and bewilderment. It also expresses frustration and distress about the fact that not everyone loves us. When this question was originally formulated it was based on the premise that 'they' came from somewhere very far away. The threat posed by people that 'hated us' was conceptualized as being external to Western societies. However, since 9/11 it has become increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that this threat is not just an external but also a domestic problem. And the realization that there are many young Muslims living in the Netherlands who do not like their society, do not want to be like us and maybe even hate us gives this threat an all-too-intimate status. Through the discovery and construction of home-grown Islamic radicalization, the Netherlands has found a tangible focus for deliberating on its elusive identity.

'We were flabbergasted to learn that she had become a fanatic,' noted a teacher of Bouchra El-Hor, a young Dutch Moroccan mother who was charged in Britain with a terrorist offence. According to her teacher she was a 'normal Dutch girl'. Reports indicated that she 'looked like an immigrant success story' and hung out at the pub with her friends and was known for her fashionable taste in clothes. [4] The realization that she did not want to be 'a normal Dutch girl' coincides with an almost panic-like discovery that a significant section of the population is estranged from its society. Instead of posing the obvious question of why Dutch society lacked a capacity to culturally integrate its population, many public figures opted for the strategy of politicizing immigration and integration. Through this process uncertainties about Dutch identity were recast as a threat posed by unassimilated and dangerous minorities. One of the regrettable consequences of the dramatization of cultural fears is that it serves as an invitation to counter performance. The traumatic legacy of the murder of Theo van Gogh serves as a reminder that individual acts of violence can have spectacular effects.

However, it is not so much the lure of radicalism as the unravelling of the meaning of being Dutch that is responsible for the sudden rise of the politics of fear in the country. To some extent the political class has contributed to this state of affairs by first pursuing a narrow technocratic approach towards immigration before panicking and politicizing the issue. In a sense their politics of fear has little in common with a traditional Machiavellian plot. It represents a performance that signals the idea that you can trust us because we are taking firm steps to deal with this problem. This new tough approach, like the previous technocratic one, by-passes the problem of answering the question of what binds society

together. As an outsider I am continually struck by the theatrical quality of the Dutch debate on issues such as identity, culture, immigration and integration. Am I a little prejudiced when I tell myself that only disoriented Dutch politicians could have dreamt up the idea of producing the video *Coming to the Netherlands* for prospective migrants? The video purports to inform migrants of Dutch life through scenes that include nudity and homosexuality. Is this what it means to be Dutch?

Nowhere else in the world would policymakers dream up the idea of making prospective migrants sit through *Coming to the Netherlands*. The very manner in which Dutchness is presented – liberal, tolerant, permissive – suggests that what is at issue is not the nation's historic past and traditions but the values and ethos that have emerged since the 1960s. It is worth noting that until the 1960s Dutch society was strongly influenced by a relatively conservative and religious ethos. The 1960s saw a dramatic rupture with this tradition and gradually the Dutch cultural elites began to perceive themselves as not simply tolerant, but also permissive. In the Netherlands and throughout the world Amsterdam has come to symbolize this cosmopolitan, secular and permissive consensus. Arguably that is why so many otherwise liberally minded people have developed a degree of cultural hostility towards a politicized Islam. It is not simply a question of Islam representing a threat to Dutch culture – more importantly it is experienced as a threat to individual lifestyles and identities. It is not simply that 'they are not like us', but also the question of 'Why don't they let us be ourselves?'. So Amsterdam does not simply suffer from an identity crisis but also from lifestyle related ones.

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When threatened identities become politicized they have a nasty tendency to invite a collective mood of insecurity and vulnerability. But once people become aware of the fact that the fundamental problem is not 'them' but their estrangement from their identity it becomes possible to confront the city's insecurities. The question that needs to be posed is what kind of a community does Amsterdam want to be in the future. Through transcending the petty questions of lifestyle identity politics, people can begin to consider real alternatives. A more future-oriented activism is the precondition for freeing ourselves from the fatalistic imagination that assigns people the status of powerlessness. Fortunately, the story of Amsterdam cannot be reduced to a tale of threatened identities. It is a place where individual anxieties coexist with the aspiration for solidarity and gaining meaning from experience. Despite perceptions of cultural threats many people know that they need to be open-minded and are ready to yield to new experience. What they need is a language through which they express their desire to be subjects rather than objects of change.

The response of a community to a threat and its level of morale is influenced by its shared experience and values and the meaning attached to them. It is through a grown-up public deliberation on the meaning of its shared experience that Amsterdam can develop its potential for dealing with the challenges it faces.

The human imagination possesses a formidable capacity to engage and learn from the risks it faces. Throughout history humanity has learnt from its setbacks and losses and has developed ways of systematically identifying, evaluating, selecting and implementing options for dealing with threats. There is always an alternative. We can renounce the distinct human qualities that have helped to transform and humanize the world and resign ourselves to the culture of fatalism that prevails today. Or we can do the opposite. Instead of celebrating passivity and vulnerability we can set about humanizing our existence. Instead of becoming an audience for yet another spectacle of fear we can take over the stage and refuse to yield to the scaremongers.

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Footnotes

1. See Frank Furedi, *Invitation To Terror: The Expanding Empire of the Unknown* (London: Continuum Press, 2007), chapter 5.
2. R. Sparks, E. Girling and I. Loader, 'Fear and Everyday Urban Lives', *Urban Studies*, nos. 5-6, vol. 38 (2001).
3. See for example L. McLaren, 'Anti-Immigrant Prejudice in Europe: Contact, Threat Perception, and Prefrences for the Exclusion of Migrants', *Social Forces*, no.3, vol. 81 (2003).
4. See Craig Whitlock, 'Terrorists Proving Harder to Profile', *The Washington Post*, 12 March 2007.

Tags

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