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Power and Fear: Masses, Elites and the Political Dynamics of Insecurity in Europe

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As is clear from the tendencies towards "renationalization" and the rediscovery of separate and irreconcilable identities that have recently been such a feature of the political rhetoric in the European Union as well as in the United States, the "politics of fear" have been successfully building up over the last several years, largely through the efforts of right-wing populist parties and movements (Wodak 2015). To shed light on these dynamics, the first issue of *De Europa* will discuss several aspects and a few of the many political interpretations of fear in the modern and contemporary age, as expressed in Continental Europe and, more generally, in the West.

Defined by Remo Bodei as a passion "of anticipation" (like hope and desire), because it generates a particular need for security in the individual whose fulfilment is continually postponed to some future time (Bodei 1991), fear has since the beginning of the modern age taken on a certain importance in Europe, not only – as the French historian Jean Delumeau has shown – as a "driver" of the course of history and collective behavior (Delumeau 1978), but also as a central factor in political thinking and action. As early as the sixteenth century Niccolò Machiavelli, drawing on a very specific anthropological conception of man as inherently evil, bears the passions in mind in his approach to the art of government, and sees fear not simply as an effect of violence and a tool of power in the hands of the prince, but also as a means of creating order and cohesion, providing the populace with the motivation and the force to abide by the city's laws (Galli 2010).

The nexus between fear and power, as the philosopher Corey Robin has pointed out, is one of the underpinnings of modernity, thanks to a large extent to the thinking of Thomas Hobbes, who "was willing to claim that 'the original of great and lasting societies consisted not in mutual good will men had toward each other, but in the mutual fear they had of each other'" (Robin 2004). Indeed, Hobbes lays the groundwork for the modern notion of "sovereign" power in the experience of fear triggered historically by Europe's civil wars and religious conflicts. On the one hand, sovereign power must put an end to the potential *bellum omnium contra omnes*, and hence to everyone's perennial fear of everyone else which for Hobbes is the essence of the "state of nature"; on the other hand, sovereign power itself subjugates the individual citizens by

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instilling fear, awe and, consequently, commanding their obedience (Evrigenis 2008). In the Hobbesian canon of the modern State, then, fear and power are ever together, each shoring the other up. Fear becomes a sort of epicenter of political power, which is at one and the same time the outcome of men's efforts to free themselves of fear, and the supreme manifestation of fear itself (Ferrero 1942).

While for Hobbes fear leads to a greater political awareness and greater rationality, Spinoza takes a different theoretical tack, opposing absolutism and the reason of state to reject the political use of fear. To Spinoza's mind, this passion takes two forms: the fear felt by the populace, and the fear that those who govern have of the masses. In the first case, fear is an unending wellspring of anxiety and thus a possible reason to revolt; in the second, it results in confused political conduct that sets the sovereign on a collision course with the will of the majority. For Spinoza, fear thus does not engender greater rationality and must be banished – along with the other passions "of anticipation" – from the political horizon by organizing rationally constituted institutions founded on the division of power (Bodei 1991).

In the thought of Montesquieu, fear is the typical passion of despotic governments: in this type of regime, a single man's untrammeled will and whims hold sway, while the common people, bereft of any reason to live, and hemmed in by the fear they feel, are increasingly degraded and disconnected from the principles of reason, falling into political listlessness. Montesquieu contrasts fear with virtue, the intrinsic feature of democratic republics, where dealings between individuals are governed not by trepidation but by openness and a shared love of equality and of frugality.

From the theoretical standpoint, this tradition was overturned at a very specific moment in European history: the French Revolution. In the 1920s and 30s, prominent historians like Georges Lefebvre and Albert Mathiez, influenced by Gustave Le Bon's studies on the psychology of crowds (Le Bon 1912), drew attention to the role of the "great fear" in the revolutionary events of 1789 (Lefebvre 1932), emphasizing in particular the spontaneous character of certain mass expressions of irrational panic (Mathiez 1922-1927). However, this view fails to acknowledge the politically "productive" side of fear (Galli 2010) which entails a process of political organization and institutionalization of fear. Thus, more recently, studies of the Great Revolution have joined forces with those of the "history of emotions" to shed light on how the real change took place chiefly during the Terror. Conscious of the need to "give legal form to the emotions", the Jacobins used fear to put an end to the people's legitimate violence and channel the desire for vengeance by institutionalizing it (Wahnich 2003). In Jacobin political thought, moreover, fear was allied with rationality, becoming a "purifying" force that could be instrumental in achieving the goal of regenerating humanity and creating the new man, upright and honest. Fear

– scientifically organized and put on a bureaucratic footing – was used to control the masses, as well as anyone and everyone in public office. According to the Jacobins, the politician's virtue consists precisely in this ability to use passion (as well as other passions such as hope) in the interests of the community (Bodei 1991).

In this continual oscillation between fear as an intrinsic trait of the masses and as a tool that the elites employ to accomplish a particular political design, the theme of fear intersected with democracy during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the new democratic society, as Tocqueville's sociological analysis shows, freedom and the equality of conditions severed the *Ancien Régime*'s hierarchical bonds based on class and on an inescapable fealty to political and religious authority. Nevertheless, faced with national governments erected on powerful centralized administrative apparatuses and with the weakening of community ties, associationism and civic participation, the individual – formally free but increasingly isolated – is overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety and fear that only the State, seemingly, can dispel. Hence the rise, in some cases, of new forms of dictatorial governments, or, far more frequently, of regimes based on an increasingly paternalistic welfare state (Robin 2004).

Confirming Tocqueville's analysis, the twentieth century welfare state, as historians, philosophers and sociologists have emphasized, has been the most important attempt to neutralize fear and spread "security", countering the risks brought by the market with public services to guarantee all citizens' right to a certain level of education, wellbeing and protection. Starting in the Seventies, however, with the steady delegitimation of government strategies for dealing with social problems, the increasingly flexible character of work and the spread of an almost "ontological" insecurity, a new "culture of control" has made major inroads on the welfare state. In an important work published in 2001, David Garland observes that the culture of control sees crime as "normal", inasmuch as it is an ever-present risk of modern life, and at the same time as "monstrous", inasmuch as it is attributed to "others", the "dangerous" and "undesirable", or in other words, the denizens of Europe's urban outskirts and the inner cities of the United States (Garland 2001). As regards the US in particular, Loïc Wacquant even envisions a "penal state" arising from the ruins of the welfare state, centering on a policy of "criminalizing misery" (Wacquant 2004).

In many ways, the welfare state was the modern form of the walls of ancient Athens, marking the boundaries of an ethos and a political space. Like those walls, the welfare state was the manifestation of the scope and the limits of the domain of citizenship. Now that the sense of community that it could still inspire, however faintly, is gone, and the political space it occupied has been swept away, the populist clamorings for new walls are spurred by the "fear of the barbarians", garbed in Islamophobic trappings (Todorov 2008). Ultimately, community and politics as the collective power to pursue the common good are

replaced by what can truly be regarded as an "identity obsession": the claim to recognition of a historical and cultural substance, whose "purity" is thought to be threatened by outside forces and enemies from within (Remotti 2010).

As the work of Zygmunt Bauman has so extensively illustrated, globalization – which, we all know, is the triumph of the market economy, eating away at the nation-states' social and political structures – has filled the public with a heightened uncertainty, accompanied by loneliness and frustration. These dynamics thus offer new opportunities to the "powers that be" to use fear to achieve their ends and impose their will. (Bauman 2006). Significantly, what we live in today has been described as the "risk society" (Beck 1986). Here, however, the most notable feature of the new forms of fear – as abundantly exemplified in Europe by the new populisms, as well as in the United States from the beginning of the "war on terror" down to the Trumpian era – is the "privatization" of fear itself. Fear no longer motivates solutions based on community ties, in a time when the "people" in the sense of *demos* has been replaced by a "virtual" people, one of opinion polls, television ratings and social networks. With globalization sapping all sense of belonging, bringing rootlessness and disorientation, an indistinct and ever-changing uniformity emerges victorious.

A public dominated by fear – as noted by the American philosopher Sheldon Wolin – is receptive to being "led", prone to split into fragments, and to surrender its independence in exchange for assurances of protection and peace. In today's world of democracies without democracy, which are not founded, chiefly, on an active citizenry, but on government exercised by the alienated and politically disenchanted masses, fear in Wolin's view is an artful product of propaganda, which exploits antipolitical sentiments, warns the public of the threat posed by enemies foreign and domestic, and is thus a form of intimidation to induce the populace to embrace certain ideas and movements (Wolin 2008). In a certain sense, then, contemporary democracies deploy a true "economy of fear": fear must be in some way calculated and even preserved, so as not to saturate the "market". Politics often operates by administering calibrated "doses" of fear: it becomes a system of control whose power feeds on uncertainty. In such a setting, it is clear that a major role is assigned to international terrorism, whose effects are amplified and reproduced in an enveloping atmosphere of primal fear about the precariousness of every moment in daily life.

Continuing along the path blazed by the Jacobins during the Terror, fear today is a fundamental tool that ensures that the elites can exercise power by manipulating and controlling the citizenry. Political rhetoric hinges on the need to defend the homeland from a series of hypothetical threats, from international trade, from immigrants, from terrorism. Spreading fear has thus become the political elites' explicit goal in order to prevail at the polls. According to the philosopher of law Luigi Ferrajoli, the elites even make demagogic use of the law and of criminal justice (Ferrajoli 2009); in a similar vein, Denis Salas employs

the expression populisme pénal (Salas 2005). The emotivization of politics is also fueled by the efforts of the mass media – the press, television, Internet – which peddle messages to the public that frequently strive to label immigrants as a social threat, solidifying the collective image of "foreigners" as dangerous elements who must be held at bay by the police. In the final analysis, what is at work here is a full-scale "fear factory" run by the elites – fear and power operating, as always, in tandem – whose classic strategy is that of the scapegoat, who in this case is the "foreigner" (and also, for example, the "rules" laid down by the European Union), to be countered by "national sovereignty".

The Italian philosopher and jurist Danilo Zolo, author of an interesting book on the politics of fear, has thrown light on the limits of a strategy for shaking off "global fear", such as that proposed by Bauman *inter alii*, centering on a "cosmopolitan republic" that erases national borders and puts power in the hands of a "world parliament". In a time when the dominion of global power is the result of policies decided by oligarchies and springs from the desire to liberalize capital movements, deregulate the labor market and limit state intervention in key sectors, a different route might perhaps be better. The real problem posed by today's politics of fear is, as we have said, the fact that the notion of "security" no longer refers to ties of belonging, to solidarity and mutual aid: security is no longer thought of as a guarantee that all citizens can organize their own lives as they see fit, but is now seen in purely "private" terms (Zolo 2011). This signals a return to the culture of despotism of Hobbesian memory, where "human nature" is "rightly" subject to despotic domination, and the political order depends entirely on fabrication and manipulation (Wolin 2016).

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