Fear is Social

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Technical Paper No. 122

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The In Search of Fearlessness Institute is dedicated to research and publishing on fear, fearlessness and emotions and motivational forces, in general, as well as critical reviews of such works. Preference is given to works with an integral theoretical perspective.

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Abstract

The author believes that one of the greatest resistances to the advancement of his conception of a new branch called 'Fear' Studies (Fisher, 2006) is the problem of reductionism in people's imaginary and thinking. It is not just a resistance they have to seeing fear is social, but that they seem to fear that it is the case. In this paper the author summarizes a brief history of his work in moving fear from the reductionistic, positivistic, individualistic, materialistic philosophies and paradigms that have largely prevented a qualitative shift in how we see what Fear is about—that is, that Fear is Social. He discusses some of the social implications of this needed shift and the resistances to it that keep feeding the global Fear Problem. He links the issue of "social pathologies" with fear.

Introduction

It hardly seems on the surface that a claim that *fear is social* would be provocative. For example, most people would realize there are fears that are both within individuals and collectives (i.e., groups, institutions, nations).

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However, the emphasis is on "fears" as understood and used as the common sense (and dominant) way of talking about fear. The social sphere of discourse is about fears, for the most part. In conversations re: fear we tend to concretize it immediately, and ultimately always psychologize it. The "psychology of fear" is the most dominating way to address fear as a phenomenon, and to design ways of knowing fear and creating fear knowledge—and, concomitant fear management practices. We define and make meaning easily within this structural psychological imaginary and way of thinking. For example, we don't typically make meaning of fear and create discourses around fear using a philosophical approach. Even less so, do we make meaning of fear using a fearism[2] or fearlessness[3] approach.

My research for 32 years on this topic shows that until we can shift our thinking to *fear itself* and then to *fear is social*—we will continue as a species to create and reproduce knowledge about fear (i.e., fear management/education) that falls far short of that which is critically required to undermine the insidious and deadly growth of the global Fear Problem.[4]

This paper will detail some of the turns in my own research and thinking on fear (and fearlessness less so)—because I believe what I went through in having to learn and continually re-adjust my critical thinking around the notion of fear—is somewhat a 'pattern' of the psyche itself (as a trained and educated human being in Canada—in North America—in the W. world). This pattern of both 'blind spots' and 'insightful breakthroughs' could likely happen with anyone else if they stay with studying the topic of fear—and, what I have in parallel called 'fear' (with ' marks)—long enough to transform their prior thinking. Of course, to do justice to the 32 years and nuances, would take a book to explain my journey. Here, I'll touch only on a few skeletal joints that hold together the ways I have come to look at fear as a subject of study (which, of course, necessarily is

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[2] E.g., see "philosophy of fearism" (Desh Subba, 2014; Fisher & Subba, 2016).

[3] E.g., see "fearlessness philosophy" (Fisher, 2010 and many other publications).

[4] Not only have I pointed to: "Something is wrong in the field of fear management" (Fisher, 2010, p. xxvii) but I have complicated the way humans see fear problems (e.g., usually they do so as "fears") in what is arguably a useful umbrella concept of "Human Fear Problem- the generic term and phenomenon which involves many of human being's worst problems that are traceable to a source in fear ('fear', e.g., see Fisher, 2013)—that is, how well we do fear management/education" (Fisher, 2010, p. 91). Although fear is applicable to all living creatures (as a problem, one might say), when I simplify the issue as global Fear Problem—my emphasis is on the human problem with fear and its management and its education.

objective and subjective—with the latter being 'about me' and my psyche—and my social role in all of this world and how it constructs an imaginary and set of biases, preoccupying mind-sets, largely unconscious worldviews and values, around *what is fear* and how *should* we best relate to it).

A Transdisciplinary & Relational Paradigm

No one will really be able to understand my discourse on fear, unless they understand my *social theory*. This claim occurred to me about nine months ago while journaling. Obviously, I am concerned about being mis-understood so typically often when I share my work. I'll give an overview then of what I mean about my social theory that is the 'boat' that carries the way I approach philosophy, knowledge, knowing and understanding in general. In my writing with B. Maria Kumar in the past weeks on a new book,[5] he and I are seeing that we have to ground our writing about fear and fearlessness—that is, give it a 'home' in *social philosophy* (a relatively unknown branch of traditional Philosophy). But what came out just this morning that kick-started me to write Technical Paper #122 is a first draft paragraph of our book abstract:

> If Fearlessness is arguably a phenomenon (like a behavior, a spirit, etc.), as well as a paradigm/methodology of inquiry, then it is also arguably a social issue of importance. Just how important is another issue to be explored here. This book is going to construct a complex issue out of fearlessness, in opposition to those approaches that want to reduce it. Such a construction is radical and goes beyond the personal (individualistic) understanding that is typical in nearly all accounts of fearlessness around the world but especially in the West.

It is not that I had not thought of fear and fearlessness as social before. It is just that I feel I have not articulated this so straightforwardly. And I realized in writing this paragraph that it is a profound 'advance' for me or anyone to come to terms with exactly what that means: in the case of this paper here I will only deal with *fear is social*; and, yet, to restrict this is one of convenience because of limited space in this paper. From the start of my critical investigation into what I thought was wrong with the entire field of fear studies (and fear management), I was strongly convinced (although,

[5] In less than 6 mo. we expect to publish *Resistances to Fearlessness: A Philosophy of Fearism Perspective* (Xlibris). This will be our third book publishing project together as co-authors.

it's still a hypothesis) that one has to keep *fear/fearlessness* in a dialectical ('whole' and 'integral') relationship as a dyadic evolutionary dynamic that is a fundamentally growth-full and creative process. I refuse to talk about one without the other of the pair. That said, implicitly, that is not just my methodological (and philosophical) preference, it is a well thought through critique of every study (and teaching) on fear that exists, whereupon they do not take this dialectical approach—as a living relationship. I have thus adopted what many thinkers are calling the new "relational turn" in epistemology. Everything is connected, in systems, in dynamics of co-relationality—everything (mostly) is affecting everything else, relationally. You could also calls this ecological thinking (e.g., ecophilosophy).

Point being, *I am a critic* and my work on fear and fearlessness has always been at home in critical philosophy and liberation traditions. Not everyone likes that approach, nor do they like that I critique their approaches the way I do. Some find, like the comment of feedback recently (below) from a philosopher professor in education, that my work is 'too narrowly' focused and misses too many other important factors. By too narrow, you can read between-the-lines that they are concerned (uncomfortable) with the emphasis I give to "fear" in my analyses of everything. They wrote (without any real study of my work for 32 years) in response to a paper I published[6] and sent them:

> ...there are two critical points for me in your text, they might seem obvious to you: first the opposition [you set up of] love-fear; is fear *the* opposite of love? I doubt. Of course it [fear] is one of them and I understand that in your framework it should be and it is—but I think by privileging fear you leave aside so many other important dimensions;
>
> the second is that every time when someone syas [something] about anything [for e.g.] something like "it should be treated this way" [which is how this philosopher is assuming my work is based upon as a critical stance I take] thinking suffers... [such coercion] it might be fearanalysis or whatever...of course in this case it is only needed accepting and follwoing your assumptions but many other roads might be walked so I prefer to stay aside when someone says "you cannot approach this issue if you do not take this road" [again, assuming that is what I am saying and doing as a critic]...just two [comments

[6] See Fisher (2017).

> here and they] maybe superficial comments, and sorry I will not be able to follow this discussion, -regards....

I'll not here analyze these comments by this colleague further. You can make up your own mind about them. But I do think it is valuable you get a sense of the kinds of common critiques I receive to my work on fear and fearlessness. Anyone who questions my work is welcome to do so. I am strong in my views but not dogmatic, or at least I try not to be. I am a philosopher, like this colleague, and I too wish not to prematurely close down options on any topic and on ways of thinking. However, I am not one to say that just any ways of thinking are all of the same value (as does a radical pluralism position, which this philosopher seems to lean toward). I am as passionate as they, I'd guess, when it comes to defending against ideologies (dominating discourses of privileging and so-called authoritarianism) that will cause the effect of "thinking suffers." Oh, yes, thinking deserves respect. My way of thinking is a way of thinking about all thinking, it is a meta-thinking theory (paradigm)—and, it is based on fearlessness. Oh, that seems a bit too much for this colleague to handle or even try to understand. So be it. Yet, here in this paper the topic is fear. The colleague doesn't want that so privileged (which, includes my fearanalysis).

So, it would be very difficult to find a common ground, but not impossible, with someone who thinks like my colleague here. What platform can we both stand on to approach the topic of fear? That is not an unproblematic point. I critiqued in the paper he read, the way so many educators (e.g., Freirean's) think that "love" is the common lens and should be privileged for solving humanity's biggest problems; and, in my paper this colleague read and as in all my work, I challenge that assumption and privileging of "love" as the be all end all. I think it is a disastrous assumption and I see not the evidence it works. That's a much longer story.

I did tell my colleague in a sentence, more or less, as I tell all my critics who think I focus too much on fear: *Actually, if you study my work, the only privileging is on the Fearlessness Paradigm.* And, if one doesn't understand that, well, they won't understand my work. Now, to turn to this technical paper, I am saying the same thing to my critics, that if you do not understand my social theory (social paradigm of a relational turn)—you will not understand my views on fear and why I use it like I do.

I am pretty sure my colleague (typical of my critics) thinks fear is this, or that, and they don't understand *fear is social*. They have a dominating imaginary, has been my experience with them, in which fear is cast into

behaviors, feelings, emotions. That is, cast into psychological fear. This is so deeply reductionistic (a type of violent epistemology[7])—at least, that's my larger argument throughout my decades of work on the topic. But let's move on...

I have lately been playing with labeling myself as a "social philosopher" just to see what that label feels like. I then turn back to my classic text on my work. In 2010 I put together some 20+ years of research, thinking and writing on the topics of fear and fearlessness. I emphasized "fearlessness" for various reasons, and declared that so because of the book's title *The World's Fearlessness Teachings.* In those years I did not even know what social philosophy was. I called myself an *integralist*, amongst other labels. But what I wish to bring forward now is just how social-oriented I was in locating the study of fear that I had embarked on in late-1989—out of an intimate loving experience with a woman—that is, out of a relationship. Fear and fearlessness only really interest me because of how they operate in relationships (where one or more gather) (see f.n. 7).

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[7] I'm not the only one to suggest that "epistemic violence" is going on in many parts of our disciplinary and social world of knowledge production, distribution and propagandizing (e.g., Michel Foucault and "social epistemology" *a la* Popkewitz). That said, what I pick up in my colleagues discourse is *fear itself* (an unconscious defense, likely)—because there is <u>not</u> a bit of curiosity remaining. Only commentary stands out in the email to me and all of it is critical of my position. Without curiosity and open dialogical invitation, you can pretty much conclude that fear-based thinking is operating and <u>not</u> fearlessness *(via* epistemic fearlessness as nonviolence). This has ramifications. Of course my colleague, like my critics, would likely 'hate' that I do such a fearanalysis on their discourse patterns of communication. But you can see, once this sharing about "fear" is unfolded, and they were at least curious enough to read my paper I sent, then you can see philosophical discussion is immediately a social phenomenon. And, I am saying thus *fear is social*—because when it is social—it really, really, really counts in terms of global far reaching impacts—far beyond an individual (psyche) and their own fears. That's why I shared this correspondence. It was to demonstrate that what really counts is *fear as social*. Fear will punch out and then shut-off communication (as my colleague did, writing "I will not be able to follow this discussion"—I call that the 'hit and run' fear-patterning—a very common defense, unfortunately). In the social (cultural, political) sphere, indeed, fear has enormous power (and privilege). We better be critical of how it all works so we know what is really going on, above the surface (e.g., fears), and below the surface (e.g., 'fear' patterning). I am pointing here to the issue of the relationship of fear as social to what can be called "social pathology" (see later in this paper).

In the 2010 book I not only give a theory of fear management systems in an evolutionary perspective, and identify several streams to why we ought to consider our species has a "Fear Problem" (capital letters), but I try to help readers situate the entire trajectory of my project. In the Introduction of the book I introduce "fearuality" and the study of "fearology."[8] What? How dare I mess up the foundational (common sense and dominating) premise that *fear is an emotion just like any other of the many emotions. It is just one, no big difference.* Yes, I consciously disrupted that norm and normative assumption and discourse that exists on what is fear and how we are supposed to think and imagine about it. I took sexuality and made fearuality analogous to it, then I took psychology and made fearology analogous to it. So, implicitly, if a psychology of fear is the dominant way of knowing fear (and ourselves, our social relations) then, I replaced that with two moves:

> (a) fear, reduced and simplified typically, is <u>not</u> merely an emotion like all other emotions (contra "psychology" as a mono-disciplinary study)
>
> (b) fear requires a specialized field of study finely attuned to the complexity of it as a phenomenon (i.e., in a holistic-integral understanding)—which ended up as "fearology" a trans-disciplinary study

What I didn't say so upfront, and wished now I had, was that both fearuality and fearology implicitly locate *fear as social* (just like sexuality is social and psychology is social—well, this latter is not maybe so obvious but it becomes very obvious when the sub-discipline "social psychology" evolved in the 20th century). More radically than merely saying I wish now to locate fear as social (i.e., a social phenomenon)—I take one step further to risk claiming *fear is social*. In other words, this more radical form of claim is that one cannot simply understand the social sphere (i.e., social life) without the interpenetrating particular, unique, and ubiquitous, and often insidious, nature of fear within everything that is social. One could say that of love, guilt, shame, happiness. Sure, you, that's understandable, but I think there is something particularly unique (and, it is hard to put in words, but is more an intuition)—that *fear* is social and the social is fear—really puts us up on awareness of a whole new level of critical consciousness. At least, it does for me. And, the notion of the *social is fear* will definitely be resisted by many critics (including the likes of my colleague above).

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[8] Fisher (2010), p. xxvi.

But IF that resistance and criticism is to have any persuasive value, in my mind, it is going to have to address the tidal wave of critiques (aka diagnoses) that have come at societies (especially in the West) in the last 30+ years, from across disciplines, that we (humans, in urban environments for the most part)—live in a *culture of fear*.[9] Meaning, culture is fear—and, meaning the social is fear.

At least, that is a hypothesis and a reset (possibility) for our social imaginaries—and, at least, it ought to raise our need to question what is going on in cultures and the social sphere (in our social life) that has brought about this huge label of what amounts to a social (cultural) pathology, by any other name. *Fear is social* raises our hackles maybe, but it is a diagnosis in and of itself that a *social pathology* is in our midst—that we are likely participating in co-creating every day. At least, that labeling, is something to investigate critically. I am not asking anyone to not think critically about this assumption—as my colleague (above) seems to estimate that I am discouraging critical thinking about all my work and claims about fear and fearlessness. I am a critical social philosopher, specializing in fear and fearlessness, and thus, to be critical and philosophical requires exactly as a praxis that I do not turn (seductively) to (fear-based) ideological domination approaches as a way to convert, coerce or reduce anyone from their own 'free thinking' (at least, as they relatively may be free in their thinking). The problem is that "freedom" is not merely an individual reality but a social one. We have another social problem—FEAR at one end of the motivational spectrum and FREEDOM at the other end.[10] I would revise this more classic oppositional spectrum by putting FEARLESSNESS at the freedom end.

Anyways, that's all a very interesting way of thinking about how individuals and collectives operate in the social milieu (especially, now as we live in a culture of fear). Back to my book Introduction I made fear social because it takes groups to enact fearology and fearuality—as global generic and developmental phenomenon that grow in their own categorical sense, way beyond what an individual experiences and grows. They are collectively located conceptualizations and phenomeon. That has always been

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[9] A plethora of writing on the meta-context of "culture of fear" can be found on the internet and particularly if you Google Scholar search my full name with that search phrase.

[10] Social psychologists of a very rare and wise kind (in my view) have set this up to be a reviewed conception in their study (see Pyszczynski, Greenberg & Arndt, 2011).

my goal to place fear in that larger context, of which Subba (2014) also did, independently of my work, in his fearism conception. What I immediately showed in my book Introduction was that "ologies" for e.g., have been evolving for a good deal of human history. They are systematic ways of studying something—some phenomenon. I suggested that even if I labeled *fearology* (the study of fear, from a transdisciplinary approach) it was immediately locatable within a series of socially evolving other 'ologies'—for e.g., I listed "emotionology," "traumatology," "terrorology," "victimology," "killology," "horrorology," and "panicology" to name a few. I then wrote,

> However, despite the strangeness of the new 'ologies,' if one had to locate my research in one area that has substantial mainstream academic status today, it would be in the subdomain of a "sociology of fear" (and risk) with a primary interest in studying the dynamics of the "culture of fear" (also called "climate of fear" or sometimes "politics of fear").[11]

Clearly, I was letting readers know that despite all my twists and turns and transdisciplinary methodologies used to study fear, basically, it ought not be forgotten that the closest grounding for my work was "sociology" and, not "psychology." That's a profound shift of emphasis and locating for the study of fear—arguably, a shift that is long over-due, as the nascent field of sociophobics in the mid-1980s[12] (i.e., anthropology and sociology of fear) tried to convince the academic world to make this leap—which was, only minorly successful. The psychology (then bio-neural psychology) continued to entrap fear studies (i.e., 'Fear' Studies, Fisher, 2006).

The other very social thing I did in the 2010 book was to immediately show people that what I am talking about in relationship to fear was a 'Fear' Project (movement) and a counter Fearlessness (R)Evolution (movement)—and, these conception are absolutely social and fundamental to everything else I would say about fear (or fearlessness). Most people, as I have learned over three decades of promoting this work, do not take-in (or prefer not to take-in) such a grand set of conceptions—and unifying ideas

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[11] Fisher (2010), p. xxvi.

[12] Scruton (1986). There are many others who have been critical of the domination of Psychology over "fear" studies, as well—albeit, those critics merely wanted a transfer of power from Psychology to their own particular field (social, cultural)—or to interdisciplinary approach (e.g., Corradi, Fagen & Garretón, 1992) and, thus were not nearly as radical as my own transdisciplinary shift—e.g., to fearology (see also Subba, 2014).

about the social (evolutionary) world. That's a whole other topic of why do not. One reason, is the turn of postmodernism, poststructuralism—and postcolonialism—as philosophies (sometimes *cum* ideologies) that are against anything liberational or emancipatory in 'grand narrative' (theories of everything) forms. They interpret my work in that regard, which is understandable. However, I believe they eschew prematurely universalist principles and understandings. I integrate them, and remain critical too. In that same book, and I continue to argue, there is value in making fear social, the social fear—and that can be done from various angles. One of the ways I do this is by keeping attention on "society"—and, what is it doing in regard to fear management/education? Schooling, and what is it doing likewise—and the State? Very important, because this has such massive impact on everyone and everything. It is here where fear matters most—in the social sphere. I then put forward (and not totally am I alone with this visionary notion)—a "fearless society."[13]

Social Pathology[14]

If it is not clear by now, this technical paper is making a direct link between fear is social and the social is pathological—that is, IF one takes into account some of the foundations of my work. Maybe only in the last 100 years is society pathological (for the most part)? Or maybe for 5000 years or 10,000 years it is so—as some thinkers have suggested, and I think they make a good case for the W. pathology and (the dominant) worldview it clings to—proving itself now a days to be highly dysfunctional to basic Life sustainability. I don't need to name all the global crises we are facing—and that in 10 to 20 years, things could be extremely deadly.

Fear and its relationship to pathology is a long history. It would require more than this technical paper to walk through. Suffice it to say, there are many controversies and conflicts going on (and probably always have)—about the good fear vs. bad fear (i.e., pathological). I won't go into that here. You've had enough introduction to get the sense of what this paper

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[13] Arguably, Spinoza is another philosopher who would not shy away from such a conception (e.g., Fisher, 2010, p. 5.

[14] I tend to side with the critical social philosophy of Axel Honneth (1999), who suggests "the civilization process as a whole represents a form of social pathology. Like Rousseau, Horkheimer and Adorno [all] were caught under the force of an immense broadening [re-defining] of the suspicion of pathologies [on the grand social and historical levels]" (p. 383).

was trying to accomplish. And, I look forward to more conversations in the future.

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