

# The politics of fear,

rarely considered since Montesquieu as an object of reflection in and of itself, makes terror the basis of despotism. In four South American countries — Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay — military regimes during the 1970s established reigns of state terror aimed at “causing disorder or isolating civil institutions capable of protecting citizens against the power of the state” (Juan E. Corradi, Patricia Weiss Fagen, and Manuel Antonio Garretón, *Fear at the Edge, State Terror and Resistance in Latin America*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992). By a curious inversion, the state which normally assures the maintenance of order, the security of individuals and — in the words of Max Weber — “the forecasting and taking into account” of the social world, becomes the mainspring of a sort of extreme insecurity and almost total unpredictability. Those dictators who “promise to do away with fear, in fact, create new fears because they profoundly disturb social routines and habits, making daily life unpredictable”; they bring about a feeling of impotence and the familiar world itself becomes filled with hostile and unknown forces. An obsession with survival stops people from getting on with life.

Terrorism and state terror, and different possible combinations of the one or the other, establish uncertainty at the heart of the social system. (This is so especially where, as Norbert Elias puts it, the given state, contrary to the logic of racketeering, has become a mafia which organises rackets and killings. There are a number of recent examples of this.) Legal definitions of criminal activity are vague; information is imprecise or inaccessible and communication difficult; physical violence is openly used together with semi-clandestine activities

such as torture and illegal executions. Acts of public intimidation (such as kidnappings accompanied by large deployments of force or public executions) bring about the most extraordinary insecurity in the midst of the most ordinary kind of existence. In these conditions, "the ability to calculate rationally the consequences of an action is profoundly affected."

However, the worst effect of terrorism and state terror is the atomisation of groups, the destruction of any solidarity among isolated and frightened individuals. Moreover, the withdrawal to primary solidarities and a kind of "amoral familism," as Juan Corradi calls it, serves to reinforce the tendency to back away from those who resist and who, it is feared, may be subject to repression. Failure to act seeks its justification in a reciprocal transfer of responsibilities which seems to be a "social exchange of excuses": those who are in power throw the ball into the court of ordinary citizens "who have nothing to lose." One says that he's just about to finish his studies, another that he doesn't want to create problems for his family or his boss, or indeed that he fears that his passport won't be renewed. (One thinks of Bohumil Hrabal's book, *Total Fear*.) The young say they're too young, and the old that they're too old. Worse, it's not unusual to observe "a veritable hatred towards those who demonstrate courage," thus placing others before a difficult moral choice. The fear that everyone has towards all others gradually isolates the individuals and groups who are most active in resistance to power. Invoking necessity, out of pessimism or cynicism, provides a powerful system of defence against calls to action. Hopelessness leads to a kind of "social autism", as Bruno Bettelheim calls it, and a retreat into silence. Public threats and private intimidation along with rumours affect individuals — who are isolated and unable to verify their subjective impressions by confronting them with those of others — condemning them to beliefs that might be more or less unrealistic and in which the boundaries between fantasy, possibility and wishful thinking are blurred. If, by the way, we don't at all take the pains to understand this "logic of collective inaction" which reaches its fullest form in the extraordinary situations created by a policy of terror, it's because we encounter it on a daily basis in all total institutions —

prisons, psychiatric and residential hospitals, as well as in the routine practices of bureaucracies or intellectual life where the diffuse fear of vague sanctions often suffices to unleash countless tiny acts of cowardice, and it is these which make possible the large and small abuses of power.

Is it possible to break out of the circle of fear? A comparative analysis of different historical situations shows that the main condition for such an escape is the existence of organisations capable of breaking through the monopoly of communications controlled by the state, of providing material and legal aid, of sustaining the effort of resistance, and gradually imposing the conviction that the horizon isn't closed forever. Thereby the great majority of people can become convinced that exceptional heroism isn't the only possibility for action and they can take courage from the discovery that many others think and act like them and that consequential personalities (at home or abroad) are supporting their actions and reinforcing the lines of defence. In other words, the most effective strategies are those which lead the silent and terrorised majority to discover its collective strength by relatively ordinary and not very risky actions. Nonetheless, such actions accompanied by very large numbers of assembled people (e.g. a silent march of a whole population towards the city centre, or the joint closure of all homes and shops) produce an immense symbolic effect, firstly upon those who carry them out, and also upon those against whom they are directed.

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