
Thematic Section

Ethnographic Approaches to the Study of Fear / *Approches ethnographiques à l'étude de la peur*

Introduction: Ethnographic Approaches to the Study of Fear

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Like all affects, fear is inherently social and relational. It is social in a variety of respects. First, the original stimulus for a feeling of fear may be something that comes from one's involvement in a social field, such as hearing a story about a crime that took place close to one's home or experiencing a physical threat by a fearsome other. But even when the most immediate stimulus of fear is something internal to the psyche, such as a bad memory or an unconscious thought, the expression of fear—whether spoken or not—and the means by which people seek to address it both involve others.

One of the main social means by which people seek to address fear is through discourse. As Teresa Caldeira (2000:19-101) has shown in her analysis of “talk of crime” in São Paulo, Brazil, discourse provides people with a means of ordering a frightening world and making it more intelligible. Through talk of crime, people learn about who and what they ought to fear and why. For middle-class São Pauleños, it might be *norteños*, people from the north who live in the favelas and are often reputed to be involved in violent crime. For Indonesians living under the early years of Suharto's authoritarian regime, it would more likely be “communists,” people whom the state classified as threats to the very fabric of the nation. Communists were associated less with any particular place than with particular institutions, such as the PKI (Indonesian Communist Party) and labour unions. Discourse addresses fear by making it possible to name certain forms of “otherness”—whether they be a category of person, place, time, institution or practice—as the objects of one's fear and to locate these others within a broader system of meaning. However, for those who are categorized as one of the threatening others and for those who question whether or not they might be, this ordering of the world can itself lead to a great deal of fear (Barker 2001:30-43; Rochijat 1985).

The organizing effects of discourse may be working on more than one level at once. In Caldeira's account of the

talk of crime, for example, she emphasizes that the fear of crime is itself symptomatic of other kinds of fears, which people do not always talk about directly. These fears are related to transformations in São Paulo's economy and the undermining effects these transformations have had on entrenched social hierarchies. As the social distance between classes breaks down, the anxiety felt by members of the middle class about their changing status is manifest not in a discourse about class relations but indirectly in a discourse about crime. James Siegel (1998:4-8) has noted a similar pattern in Indonesia where fears about social revolution and a more general menace came to be displaced onto fears of a certain criminal type, known as the *preman*, who came from the street but was upwardly mobile. More generally, Brian Massumi (1993:12) has argued that fear is so integral to consumer capitalism and so much a part of everyday life that it might be considered to be the affect proper to late capitalism. Appadurai (2006:8) has similarly drawn a connection between what he calls a "fear of small numbers" (such as the fear of minorities, elites, terrorist cells) and deeper anxieties of "incompleteness" linked to globalization and liberal democracy.

In trying to understand the deeper sources of fear, it is important to recognize that fear may be sufficiently repressed that it is not displaced onto other subjects but becomes manifest in a discourse of expressive silences, unfinished sentences, and non-verbal cues (for example Smith, this volume). Whether it occurs verbally or non-verbally, however, discourse can serve to organize and make intelligible fears that are latent, masked or unconscious. This is evident even in cases where the form of intelligibility given to fear is that it is inexpressible or incomprehensible.

The organizing effects of discourse often serve as a prelude to other kinds of responses aimed at addressing the problem of fear. In Indonesia during the early 1980s and again during the mid-1990s, the fear of *preman* provided the prelude to a campaign of "mysterious killings" (*pembunuhan misterius*) in which unidentified paramilitary forces hunted down and murdered recidivists and others considered by the police and the Army to be habitual criminals (Barker 2001; Bouchier 1990; van der Kroef 1985). Such use of a supposedly widespread public fear as a pretext for violent state interventions is not uncommon. It is evident in all the innumerable "wars" on drugs, crime, piracy and terror that have been declared and fought around the world, from New York City to Colombia to South Africa to Afghanistan. Each of these wars has its own particular manner of defining threats and its own techniques and strategies for trying to remove these

threats. Some of these techniques and strategies are violent and others are not. Wars on crime in Indonesia have often been violent, but the backdrop to these wars has been a steady expansion of bureaucratic means of social control and surveillance. In the bureaucracy, fear does not lose its force but reactions to it become routinized. In the Indonesian police precinct where I conducted ethnographic research in the mid-1990s, this routinization was evident in the ways that statistics were collected, analyzed and used to generate synoptic charts that identified certain parts of the cityscape, such as churches, market places and bus terminals, or certain elements of the population, such as former members of the PKI, as the loci of threats to public order. The social geography of fear represented in these charts was sometimes used merely to demonstrate to higher ups in the bureaucracy that the local precinct had matters in hand, but the status of particular persons and places in these charts could also serve as the basis for decisions about how frequently an area was patrolled or how a suspect was treated. In these examples, discourses that make fears intelligible are closely entwined with state strategies and techniques aimed at eliminating or managing perceived threats. Discourses about fear incite the state to particular kinds of actions.

The character of state responses to fear may be derived from historical experiences in a given locale or they may be the result of globalizing discourses and practices. Peru's recent efforts to target a resurgent Shining Path undoubtedly draw upon methods used during earlier phases of the conflict, when the Maoist rebel movement was more powerful and was based in a different region of the country. But it is also evident that the panoply of practices involved in counterinsurgency operations and "wars" on drugs and on terror are drawn from a fairly standardized tool kit. Government authorities learn from one another, sometimes explicitly through joint-training initiatives like the School of the Americas (Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) and exchange programs for military personnel, and sometimes indirectly through media coverage and other forms of reporting. Thus, when one traces the history of state responses to a given set of fears one usually comes across both a local genealogy and a global genealogy for a state's particular responses.

Responses to fear come not just from the state but also from a wide range of societal groups and individuals. The former include non-governmental organizations, such as environmental groups mobilizing to try to prevent the worst effects of climate change, human rights groups seeking to protect citizens from state violence, and women's shelters seeking to protect women from the dangers of

domestic abuse. The latter include the wide range of mental health professionals and traditional healers that help people deal with fear-related ailments such as panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety. They also include institutions that use magic, science or religion to address routine fears by making them more intelligible and by providing steps one can take to eliminate or mitigate risk. Michael Taussig (1980:143-150), for example, described how Bolivian miners used ritual offerings to appease the spirit of the mines and to address their fears of tunnel collapse, dynamite explosions and the like. Clifford Geertz (1960) showed how, in Java, the *slametan* ritual was a crucial means by which many Javanese confronted the risks to health, well-being and security that came with important shifts in life cycle, place of residence and work. Sometimes one can also ask a specialist to recite certain prayers from the Koran or to give one an amulet that will help ward off certain dangers. Many of these techniques make use of a form of divination that uses numerology to reduce the perceived risk of certain actions—like travelling, getting married, et cetera—by finding the most auspicious time to do them. Nowadays in Java, this kind of risk assessment exists alongside a whole array of more “scientific” methods of risk assessment, like the actuarial models used by the insurance and finance industries. The growing pervasiveness of finance and insurance means that the techniques these industries use for assessing and assigning monetary value to risk will concern everyone. Some have even characterized the coming society as a “risk society” (Beck 1992; Giddens 1999; see also Virilio 1993), where more and more of our social institutions and governmental techniques are designed with the aim of reducing risk.

In many countries, the boundaries between state responses to fear and societal responses to fear are blurred. A mundane example of this blurring is the drill, in which people are asked or obliged by government agencies to perform a sequence of actions to prepare to respond to an impending danger. Well-known examples of these drills were those performed by American school children during the Cold War, when they were taught how they ought to respond in the event of a nuclear war: by getting under their desks, going to a fallout shelter and so on. Similar drills are common today in parts of Indonesia as students are taught how to prepare for a tsunami. More broadly, civil defense of various kinds—militias, paramilitaries, neighbourhood watch programs, vigilante groups, gangs—has, in many contexts, become a key means for people to protect themselves against threats (Barker 2006; Buur and Jensen 2004; Feldman 1991:46-84). Such groups are common in parts of the world where violence is

endemic or where the state may be seen as ineffective and where communities take the law into their own hands. These groups may sometimes act relatively independently of the state and can even help to mark out spheres of autonomy where the state has little capacity to exert its authority. But more often they enjoy some degree of training, support and oversight by the state or by particular cliques within the state.

State and societal responses to fear are manifested not just in the realms of discourses and institutions but also in security technologies, architecture and the built environment. In his writings on Los Angeles, Mike Davis (1992:223-263; 1998:359-422) described the “ecology of fear” that led Los Angeles to become one of the most fortified cities in the world. He shows how city planning, architecture and surveillance technologies have been used to keep feared groups, such as African Americans and the homeless, out of the financial core and out of certain neighbourhoods. Indeed, it appears that cities around the world are becoming increasingly fortified and their inhabitants increasingly fearful (Balán 2002; Caldeira 2000:256-296). In some cases, fortifications against feared others extend to national boundaries, like the U.S.-Mexican border or the walled boundary between Israel and the Palestinian territories (Weizman 2007). Technologies do not only address fears of certain kinds of people; they also address fears of accidents, disasters and illness (Massumi 1993).

The discourses, institutions and technologies aimed at addressing fears often have the ironic effect of communicating these fears more widely. Discourses focusing on fear and danger help to organize the world and to locate sources of fear but they also serve to remind people that they ought to be afraid. In Indonesia in the late 1990s, I heard stories about a riot in a nearby town, Tasikmalaya, in which several buildings in the town were destroyed and many people feared there would be widespread violence. The stories I heard all involved roles for the police, the army, the local government, a group of Islamic youth and Chinese businesspeople, but they diverged in their account of whom the targets of the violence had been and what the motive for the riots had been. I noticed that everyone told stories that made it seem that people of their ilk were not among those that had been targeted. In this sense, they told stories that they would find overtly reassuring. But all of these people were aware that theirs was only one version of events and doubts thus crept in. The retelling of their story thus had the ironic effect of reproducing fear, since it served as a reminder of all the unknowns about the case. So even as discourse aims to mitigate fear, it also allows fear to travel and to reproduce. The same is true for many institutionalized responses to fear; they

may serve to redirect fear onto particular subjects but they do not necessarily allay people's fears. The War on Terror might make a person more worried about getting on an airplane with someone who looks like they are from the Middle East, but it does not necessarily make them feel safer from terrorism. Furthermore, responses like the War on Terror or a war on crime always incite more discourse as more boots on the ground yield more criminal and terrorist subjects, more rumours and more stories in the media. As fears become routinized, they "undermine one's confidence in interpreting the world" (Green 1999:59).

The assemblage of discourses, institutions and technologies that shape the social dimensions of fear may sometimes achieve a certain degree of stability and coherence over time. In these cases we might talk about a *culture of fear*.¹ Cultures of fear may be restricted to a particular locality, such as a city or nation-state, but they may also be global in scope. An example of a very longstanding global culture of fear is that of the Cold War, in which the fear of nuclear Armageddon radically reconfigured governments, economies and societies around the world (Masco 2006). In more recent years, we have seen the emergence of at least three distinct global cultures of fear. The first of these was that produced by the 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror. This culture has been characterized by airport security checks, threat level warnings, wars in the Middle East and so on. The second of these was the climate crisis brought on by global warming and a whole array of related and unrelated "natural" disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina, the Indian Ocean tsunami and flooding in India.² Finally, there is the culture of fear taking shape out of the global financial crisis and what some believe will be one of the worst economic depressions of the past hundred years. In Canada, manufacturing, forestry and oil jobs are disappearing; and in the United States, large corporations are failing, homes are being foreclosed and members of the over-leveraged middle class are being pushed into poverty. In just the past seven or eight years, these three recent global cultures of fear, taken together, have taught many people around the world what it means to fear for their lives, their civil liberties, their future and their livelihoods.

Ethnographic studies of cultures of fear can produce powerful insights into subjectivities, epistemologies, social relations and politics (Das 2000; Douglas 1966; Massumi 1993). An analysis of the War on Terror, for example, can reveal a great deal about American anxieties related to race, globalization and the fragility of civil rights. Studies of fears about climate change can provide the grounds for better understanding the terms in which human-nature

relations are being construed, the means by which scientific authority is constructed and challenged, and the differences between environmental movements in various parts of the globe. And, analyses of fears about the financial crisis can shed light on problems of social inequality, popular anxieties about the conditions of late-capitalist accumulation and coping strategies under conditions of economic hardship.

One of the most interesting fields of investigation relating to fear is the study of the role played by a given culture of fear in shoring up a particular political regime or a particular mode of production. The connections between fear and political economy are sometimes relatively easy to trace but sometimes the "real that lurks in the background" (Žižek 1999:204; see also Smith 2006:621-622) is not so readily observable and may only become evident after many years. For example, it has taken decades for scholars of Indonesia to establish the complex interconnections between the regimes of fear cultivated by President Suharto of Indonesia during his 32 years of rule and the Indonesian political economy of this period. But many of the connections are now quite clear. For example, we now know that Suharto's government promoted a fear of communism, a fear of Islam and a fear of crime and that these fears had the effect of weakening opposition while strengthening the Indonesian Armed Forces and the ruling party (Bourchier 1990; Roosa 2006; Sidel 2007). The overwhelming strength of these latter blocs yielded an extremely long-lived political regime. Less directly, but also demonstrably, this regime of fear had the effect of promoting the integration of the Indonesian economy into the global economy. Elements of the Indonesian oligarchy and the Army benefitted greatly from foreign investments in resource extraction, agriculture, telecommunications and industry, and it was an alliance between these elements and foreign capital that pushed for a degree of liberalization of the Indonesian economy (Barker 2008). At the same time, the dominant role of the Armed Forces in the economy helped to raise primitive accumulation, or accumulation by dispossession, to a whole new level as large swathes of land and large quantities of natural resources were taken over using violence or the threat of violence. Fear was thus both a cause (among many) and an effect of this broader political economic transformation.

This volume was conceived at a time when the War on Terror was losing its hold on our political culture and other fears began to vie for our attention. Our aim was not to focus on our own current state of affairs but to gain a critical perspective by looking at cultures of fear in other parts of the world and in other eras. The seven essays in

this volume focus on cultures of fear in Spain, Poland, Mexico, Colombia, Guatemala, Argentina and post-Vietnam America. Needless to say, this long list of countries represents only a small sample of places around the world where fear has been an organizing feature of social and cultural life during the past few decades. Nonetheless, it is a sufficiently broad sample to shed light not only on the specific characteristics and consequences of particular cultures of fear, but also to illustrate the value of various kinds of approaches to studying fear. We hope that the lessons these researchers provide will be of help to ethnographers grappling with emergent cultures of fear around the world and in their own lives.

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Acknowledgments

This special issue is the outcome of a symposium entitled *Fear: An International Symposium* held at the University of Toronto in 2006 with support from the Department of Anthropology and a Connaught Grant. The symposium was held in tandem with the joint-CASCA/AES (Canadian Anthropology Society/American Ethnological Society) meetings. The symposium included a keynote address by Viveiros de Castro and a plenary panel on "The Structures of Fear" organized by Gavin Smith. The papers included in this volume were written for the latter panel. Tania Li, one of the organizers of the symposium, rounds off the volume with an Afterword. The editors are grateful to the former and current editors of *Anthropologica*, Winnie Lem and Andrew Lyons, and to the managing editor, Leslie Jermyn, for their help in bringing this volume to fruition. We are also grateful to the numerous faculty and graduate students at the University of Toronto who helped make the 2006 symposium such a success.

Notes

- 1 Taussig (1987) and Bourgois (1996:34) use the term "culture of terror," and Green (1999) uses the term "culture of fear" to describe a cultural formation produced by conditions of endemic violence. Here I am using the term more broadly to include not just violence but threats of all kinds.
- 2 On the social construction of "natural" disasters and the way such disasters have been interpreted using New Age religion, see Davis (1998:6-9).

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