Modern institutions between trust and fear: elements for an interpretation of legitimation through expertise

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Modern Institutions between Trust and Fear.

Elements for an interpretation of legitimation through expertise.

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Abstract: The article deals with the ambiguous relation between fear and expertise, and examines how it affects institutions' legitimation. In contemporary societies the so-called expert systems can be considered as powerful trust creators. However their power can also cause fear, as their control over the majority of everyday life tasks can have a "disabling" effect on lay people. This double-edged role deeply influences the relation between citizens and institutions, the latter considerably relying on expertise in order to be perceived as rational actors. Fear, therefore, can be considered as a central element in determining the legitimacy of institutions in modern societies.

> Natural disasters, transportation accidents, spies, famines and droughts, serial killers, sex addiction, fluoridation, terrorism, rock music, assassination, global warming, Willie Horton, wrinkles, ozone depletion, Satanism, aging ... What aspect of life, from the most momentous to the most trivial, has *not* become a workstation in the mass production line of fear?
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> *Brian Massumi – "The Politics of Everyday Fear"*

In twenty-first century, fear deeply affects social life under a number of aspects. As suggested by Massumi "from the most momentous to the most trivial" (1993, VIII) aspect of life can become the object of fear "production" and "consumption", bringing about what many observers described as an "Age of Anxiety" (see Salecl 2004). In modern societies a new dimension of fear appears, transforming its instinctive nature. Settings of fear move from nature to society and, as suggested by Elias, from the eighteenth century on: "Social life becomes a different kind of danger zone" (1982, 298), and fear arises as a fundamental element in shaping social structure and human relations.

This paper aims to examine the role that fear plays in defining a particular area of social life, namely relations between citizens and institutions, and the mechanisms through which the latter try to reinforce their legitimacy and power. Such a relation is strictly influenced by the emergence of new key-actors in reducing, but also in generating, anxiety: the so-called expert systems (Furedi 2006; Altheide 2013). These "systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise" (Giddens 1990, 27) are one of the pillars of institutions' credibility nowadays. Furthermore, institutionalised organizations rely on technical and expert knowledge to be perceived as rational actors. Considering this, a fear-based perspective on this dynamics offers useful insights to interpret this process of "legitimation-through-expertise" and to consider its possible drifts.

1. Fear as a social fact: Main elements of a sociological approach to fear

Despite its relevance in contemporary public discourse, for many years fear has been understudied in the field of social sciences. Although often examined in relation to specific issues

such as crime, the topic of fear has rarely been explored as a social phenomenon by itself, and thus remained relatively under-theorised for many years (Hankiss 2001; Tudor 2003; Furedi 2006).

Nevertheless, important steps have been taken in order to consider fear not only as an individual, physical or evolutionary reaction, but as a *social fact,* and to distinguish it from the idea of risk. Considering fear as an autonomous phenomenon implies a shift from a strict focus on fear as a consequence of social dynamics or individual relationships, to the social consequences of fear. In this view: "Fear itself is a risk and must be included in risk-management policymaking" (Gray and Ropeik 2002, 114). Thus, sociology of fear mainly debates two dimensions: the first revolves around the way culture and social structure influence the experience of fear, whereas the second focuses on the consequences of these feelings on individual behaviour and social structure.

As for the first dimension of the debate, scholars have underlined the role of culture and social structure in defining our fears, suggesting that the *who*, *what* and even *how* we fear is somehow socially constructed[1]. As suggested by Furedi (2006), our reactions to specific circumstances are mediated by cultural norms that suggest to people what kind of reaction is expected from them. Moreover, a number of studies (Altheide 2002, 2013; Glassner 1999) underlined the role of mass media in creating what Massumi defined a "mass production line of fear" (1993, VIII). Emotional status affecting a society can sometimes be so enduring as to become institutionalised models of social action: the so-called "emotional climates" (Tudor 2003). Such climates, according to Barbalet, are "significant in the formation and maintenance of political and social identities" and "differentiate social groups or categories by virtue of the fact that they are shared by their members and unlikely to be shared with non-members" (2001, 159).

The role played by emotions in generating belonging and in defining ingroups and outgroups introduces the second dimension of the social nature of fear: the way in which fear affects social structure and individual behaviour. Considerations on emotional climates focus on *macro* effects of fear in society, but emotional climates also affect the micro level significantly. Both in contemporary and ancient societies, fear has always been used as an instrument of social control, either with repressive or pedagogical purposes, thus it also plays a pivotal role in interactions between individuals. In a game theory perspective, most dilemmas of social life are shaped by "fear of non cooperation" that determines the choice between cooperation or defection (Kuwabara 2005, 1258). However, it is important to underline that fear does not affect social behaviours in a particular way, since it can both cause or dampen action (Goodwin and Jasper 2006). Therefore, in a broader perspective, it can be seen as an engine to promote social, political or economic change

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[1] Different authors give empirical evidences of the impact of socio-economical factors on fears and on the way in which fear is experienced (e.g. Liska, Lawrence and Sanchirico 1982; Glassner 1999).

(Barbalet 2001) or as an instrument to maintain the *status quo* (Federico and Deason 2012). Nevertheless, as the paper discusses, some aspects of the contemporary culture of fear create conditions that seem to be associated with the second option more strongly.

The sociological approach to fear also contributes to the understanding of how fear has changed in contemporary highly mediated societies. Indeed, as an effect of the increasing level of mediation, fear is less and less a "first hand" experience but an abstract, general or discursive one (Furedi 2011). This trend can be linked to the evolution of risk towards a global dimension (Beck 1992), which is strictly connected to the modernisation process. If in earlier periods risks "assaulted the nose or the eyes, and were thus perceptible to the senses", with modernisation they "escape perception", as are "localized in the sphere of physical and chemical formulas" (ivi, 21). Fear and risk evolve in parallel towards an abstract and generalised level. However, such an evolution activated a process of *autonomisation* of fear from risk. Mediated fear no longer needs defined risks to be experienced or real danger to exist, or at least, there is little correspondence between real threats and their perception by public opinion (Altheide 2013; Pain 2012, Glassner 1999).

In addition to its independence from actual threats, fear gained a pervasive nature as different scholars underline. As suggested by Altheide: "fear has become a dominant public perspective. Fear begins with things we fear, but over time, with enough repetition and expanded use, it becomes a way of looking at life. […] Fear is one of the few perspectives that citizens share today" (2002, 3). Furedi (2006) and Glassner (1999) focus on the "culture of fear" pervading contemporary societies, and Hubbard (2003) talks about fear that saturates spaces of everyday life. Massumi introduces the concept of "low-level fear", as "a kind of background radiation saturating existence" (1993, 24). More recently, Svendsen (2008,12) described fear as "the emotion that controls the public, [...] a magnifying glass through which we consider the world".

Therefore, fear is no longer "fear of something" but it is a sort of generalised feeling attached to different issues. Quoting Furedi: "Today fear has an unpredictable and free-floating character" (2005, 4). Free-floating fear may be described as a sort of prediction of terrible and unforeseen events, and this distance from actual threats enhances its power since "fear is at its most fearful when it is diffuse, scattered, unclear, unattached, unanchored, free floating, with no clear address or cause; when it hunts us with no visible rhyme or reason, when the menace we should be afraid of can be glimpsed everywhere but it's nowhere to be seen" (Bauman 2006, 2).

As a consequence of this emerging scenario, fear nowadays has become a sort of perspective or frame – in Goffman's (1974) terms – through which reality is interpreted. It became "a framework for developing identities and for engaging in social life" (Altheide 2002, 3). Moreover, in contemporary societies it grew into one of the major forces shaping, for example, political

activities[2] (Onuf 2012) and the search for consensus, and it is mirrored in a number of areas of social organisation, such as space and the structure of our cities (Body-Gendrot 2012). Effects of fear transcend individual behaviour to be experienced by society as a whole.

Even if contemporary fear has a clear and distinctive *macro* component, the feeling of anxiety and fright is often experienced at a very private level. Consistently with the individualization process that came with modernization, fears are rarely shared and faced collectively. This process of "privatisation" (Furedi 2011) of fear turns out to be one of its most paralysing features, responsible for the sense of impotence and for the feeling of the uselessness of reacting.

In the transition from pre-modern or pre-industrial fear to contemporary fear, the *micro-macro* relation is reversed. In the past, micro determinants (personal experiences) provoked fears that were managed at the macro (community) level. Nowadays, the cultural and discursive (macro) dimension of fear creates the conditions for a private and individual (micro) experience of fear.

2. The paradox of modernity and the development of expert systems

The evolution of fear into a widespread and pervasive social phenomenon highlights one of the most controversial aspects of modernity and reveals its ambiguous nature. Indeed, as noted by Bauman, "modernity was to be the great leap forward" (2006, 2) of human history, and should have brought humanity away from war, fear and terror. Many among the founders of sociology shared such an optimistic view, agreeing that benefits coming along with modernity would largely overcome the problems brought by changes (Giddens 1990; Lash and Wynne 1992). However, many earlier scholars underestimated the dark side of modernity, since "ours is, again, a time of fear" (Bauman 2006, 2), in which anxieties keep growing despite – or maybe because of - the significant enhancement of the quality of life that actually occurred (Sjoberg 2013).

This double-edged nature of modernisation can be better understood by considering the so-called disembedding process and in particular the development of abstract and expert systems. These are among the most relevant processes taking place in modernisation, according to Giddens' analysis (1990). The concept of disembedding is used by the author to describe the " 'lifting out' of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space" (ivi, 21). Disembedding is a milestone in the evolution of fear towards its generalized, mediated and diffuse nature. More specifically, a pivotal role is played by the diffusion of systems of expertise and technical means to which the control of large areas of social life is delegated, which is one of the mechanisms that characterise the disembedding process. The position of expert

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[2] The well known term "politics of fear" refers to decision makers' promotion and use of audience beliefs and assumptions about danger, risk, and fear in order to achieve certain policy goals (Altheide 2006, 15).

systems in the fear-trust dynamics is ambiguous. On the one side they are, doubtless, strong mechanisms of trust creation. On the other side, as we will see, they seem to play a part in the arousal of fear (Hoggett 2013). The reliability of expertise makes us feel confident that the ceiling won't fall on our head, that doctors will be able to find solutions to our illnesses or that our cars will brake when we push the pedal. We do not ignore the risk that these activities entail in principle, but we pay little attention to the remaining risk relying upon the fact that experts' work has lowered it appropriately. This kind of trust can be, in a certain way, compared to faith (Giddens 1990), for we are not able to understand how expert systems and their products work, but we simply believe that they will.

In modern society faith in expertise is made necessary by the increase of specialization and professionalization. In a specialized society, everyone can be considered an expert in something, and needs (or at least feels a need for) the help of others to deal with those activities in which he is not specialized. This trend does not take place only when technical or technological issues are involved but is spread among all human activities, and can reach a paradoxical strength. As noted by Furedi when referring to the professionalization of parenting, the need for experts' assistance "indicates the low estimation in which people are seen. What humanity has coped with since the beginning of time now requires the certification of experts" (2006, 140).

Moreover, faith in experts is fostered by the high institutionalization of their role, which has a strong normative impact on actor's behaviour: "self made" solutions to problems are often stigmatised in many fields of life. Nevertheless, even if expert systems can really enhance security and the quality of life, they do not seem to be able to defeat or contain the growing of fear in modern society. Rather, they can be considered among its causes. As Stearns notices: "Complementing the new expertise was a growing if amorphous sense that the wider world was a more dangerous place than have previously been imagined" (2006, 99).

The increasing influence of expertise can be linked to the arising of anxiety in modern societies at two different levels. The first concerns fear in expert systems themselves, and can be referred to as "fear *of* modernity". The second can be seen as a consequence of the loss of control upon life deriving from delegating to professional knowledge many of our activities and responsibilities. I will define this second situation "fear *after* modernity".

The "fear *of* modernity" deals with the evolution of risk which I referred to above. The industrialization process, and the related technological progress, brought on the scene new dangers that affect the world globally (Beck 1992, Body-Gendrot 2012). Fear about global catastrophes is not a peculiar feature of modern society. But the distinctive aspect of nowadays' global risks is that

they are provoked by humanity itself and they "will be there as long as modernity endures – as long as the rapidity of social and technological change continues", as Giddens notices (1991, 122).

Fears related to progress and to the growing of expertise do not concern only global threats, but are also experienced at a micro level. First of all this is because together with the development of new machinery, such as for example cars, mechanical risks undeniably increased (Stearns 2006). Secondly, lay people have always had an ambivalent relation with technical knowledge and, more in general, with science and thus fear related to progress may emerge (Bucchi 2009). Faith in expertise – in the sense of trust with no evidence to contrast against – is based on the recognition of ignorance of the public. This faith generates a relation of power and a sense of respect that are often accompanied by fear. Experts have a power that people are rarely able to evaluate because of the lack of proper means and knowledge, and the possibility of an arbitrary exercise of this supremacy can scare lay-people.

Experts' and professionals' control over many areas of human activity can promote fear also beyond the worry for direct consequences of their behaviour. Indeed, a progressive loss of self confidence develops among people as a side-effect of the growth of experts' authority and of the suspicion towards self-made solutions. This dynamic is the one I referred to as "fear *after* modernity": people no longer consider themselves able to cope with their problems on their own, no matter whether they have a practical, psychological or social nature (Furedi 2006). This is why specialized professions may be referred to as "disabling" (Illich, McKnight, Zola, Caplan and Shaiken 1977).

The increasing practice of delegating important functions of everyday life has made people less able to exert control over the environment, and made them feel more exposed to threats and dangers. As a consequence, anxiety and fear grow together with the decrease of effective or perceived agency. Modern society is pervaded with situations that people are no longer able to manage without the help of the experts. Such societies are consequently full of potential dangers and more scary than never before.

Experts and professionals, on their side, have no interest in avoiding this process. On the contrary, they thrive and flourish on this kind of fear which legitimates their role and makes them even more indispensable. Fear itself produces its own experts, who help in dealing with anxiety, the erosion of trust and its effects on social relationship (Furedi 2006).

Expert systems are at the same time mechanisms of trust creation and erosion. Such an ambivalent role can originate a vicious circle of rising fear. The more people feel afraid and unable to cope with threats, the more they will look for expertise to grant their security and the appropriateness of the solutions. However, this will strengthen the perception of being dependent

and unable to exert any form of control over the environment, which on the long run ends with a growth of fear.

3. Institutions, expertise and legitimation. Elements for a fear-based perspective

The progressive loss of control over the environment that affects people nowadays, and the growing vulnerability and fear are not an experts' concern exclusively. The rise of these problems necessarily involves institutions, as one of the most prominent agents in shaping social reality and providing trust. Coherently with their role, institutions create rules that have legal implications, and suggest models of behaviour that have a strong normative nature. Modernization even enhanced their importance and visibility (March and Olsen 1984, 734) and expanded their field of influence also to many aspects concerning security and fear (Cahir 2013).

Institutions do not only react to people's fears by finding a solution to their anxieties. In modern societies, they substitute for individuals in many of the choices about safety and how to avoid potential dangers. These decisions no longer pertain to single actors, and are therefore institutionalised. Regulations such as the use of seatbelts, rules to avoid work related injuries, sanitary norms and, in general, prohibitions on pursuing risky behaviour do not only prevent individuals from dangers, but also manage to reduce the fear they provoke. Even an institutionalised life course trajectory such as wedding or finding a "good job" can downplay or prevent from the fear of social sanction and of being left alone. Under some circumstances, institutionalised organizations (such as the ones controlling public order), and institutionalised models of behaviour simply do not allow people to experiment with fear-provoking situations. Once again, people give up control over their choices and social actions, devolving it to an external actor. And once again, fear act as a powerful amplifier of this process: "When you're living in fear, it's easy to let others make security decisions for you. […] When it comes to security, fear is the barrier between ignorance and understanding" (Schneier 2003, 9).

Analogies with the above stated consideration on expert systems are evident. And, of course, they are not accidental. As a matter of fact in our society "*the nature of modern institutions is deeply bound up with the mechanisms of trust in abstract systems*, especially trust in expert systems" (Giddens 1990, 83). Between the two entities a two-way relation of legitimation is established. In some cases institutions endorse experts' work, providing them with authority and attesting the appropriateness of their behaviour. In other cases, on the contrary, a close relation with expertise, or the incorporation of it, gives to institutionalised organizations more credibility and trustworthiness. This second aspect seems to be more relevant to this analysis and requires a closer look (Boswell 2009).

In order to gain legitimacy and consensus, institutions nowadays make a constant effort to be considered as rational actors, basing every decision on knowledge and expertise and on a careful evaluation of it. Thus they try to avoid being perceived as leaning on values, personal commitment or political logics. Social, political and economic institutions attempt in many different ways to be perceived as "expert systems" themselves, since modern authority can no longer be due to god or genealogy, but rather on technical competences (Furedi 2013).

This progressive overlapping with expert systems follows different paths. Sometimes technicians and professionals are directly enrolled by institutionalised organizations. In other circumstances officers and politicians try to reproduce experts' behaviour, collecting all sort of relevant information before taking decisions. This knowledge, however, can often be used in a symbolic way to justify choices and to build accounts of decision making processes that are strictly connected to the rhetoric of rationality.

This process of legitimation through expertise deepens its roots in the generalized status of fear affecting our society. Rationality and technical knowledge represent the ideal type of objectivity, which is highly valued not only as a way of knowing and choosing, but almost as a moral value, and has a powerful potential of trust creation and reassurance (Furedi 2013).

In modern societies, a reputation based on technical excellence seems to be more important than one based on values, affordability (Pizzorno 2007) or consensus (Illich, McKnight, Zola, Caplan and Shaiken 1977). Facing the uncertainty of the world, people need to think that those who decide on topics of public interest are moved by a rational and defined purpose, and base their choices on relevant knowledge (Bobbio 1996). On the contrary, the possibility that institutions can decide under external political pressure, ideological influence, or, even worse, by chance, would cause great anxiety in the public. Underlying this dynamic is a missed recognition (whether voluntary or not) of the strong ambiguity that distinguishes many circumstances in which we are asked for a decision. Ambiguous situations are in fact those in which an increasing of knowledge or the reference to expertise prove to be ineffective in showing the best solution. Conversely, where a rational model is rather inapplicable, political, value laden or there are particular circumstances, casual choices seems to be justified[3].

A fear based perspective offers useful insights to interpret this process of legitimation through expertise. It suggests looking at fear as a fundamental element to gain lay people's trust by increasing technical competences or, at least, by adopting the rhetoric of expert systems. And the

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[3] Sen, for example, often refers to the old story of Buridan's ass, which died of starvation in front of two identical haystacks between which it was not able to choose rationally. In that case, a casual choice would have been perfectly justified (Sen 2000).

more institutions and expert systems are legitimated, the more people will delegate them relevant functions of their life. This perspective also allows considering the double edged nature of "expert institutions": powerful promoters of trust on one side, possible causes (and beneficiaries) of a growing sense of impotence on the other.

4. Conclusion: alternatives and ways out.

The possibility that expert systems and rational institutions can reinforce fear by generating a sense of impotence is of course only one of many possible alternatives. The stability and the effectiveness of institutions can, in many cases, simply create a climate of trust and confidence that favours long term investment, and that make people feel free to choose their own trajectories in life. Moreover, as stated above, the passive acceptance and the handover of individual choices to expert systems and organization is only one among many effects of fear. Even recent history shows that men's ability to react to threats by trying to change the status quo and sometimes even subverting institutions is still present and alive. It is doubtless that in times of crisis or danger people are able to find previously unforeseeable resources and to reinvent their daily lives. The vicious circle, described here, between fear and disabling expertise only suggests a possible drift that the complex relation between lay people, experts and institutions may take independent of specific events.

Besides, this spiral seems to show a crack that offers a possible way out. As we have shown rational or expert institutions, just like expert systems, can promote fear through "disabling professionalism", but can themselves become an object of fear. The growth of the power of expert institutions beyond a certain threshold, especially when associated with some evidence of ineffective behaviour (Frame 2012), can enhance the perception of this power as something to be feared. That threshold marks the boundary between confidence and fear, and can break the circle of trust, altering the legitimation process.

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