

## Introduction: The Phobic Regimes of Modernity

IT IS COMMONLY CALLED AN instinct, an emotion, a symptom, a neurochemical reaction.

Sometimes it happens to us: we are terrorized, intimidated, daunted, cowed.

Sometimes it happens in us: we shiver, quiver, shudder, and shake.

Sometimes we avoid it. Sometimes we tackle it. And sometimes we name it.

Oh, how we name it. We have names for the fear of actions. Ablutophobes, for example, fear washing or bathing, while acarophobes fear itching, or the insects that prompt it. We invent names for the fear of absences. Athazagoraphobes fear being forgotten. Necrophobes fear death. We have names for the fear of words—the logophobes, for example, or the hippopotomonstrosesquipedaliaphobes, who fear unusually long words, or the sesquipedaliaphobes, who also fear long words, though presumably not as much. And of course, we have names for fear of animals. Forget the arachnophobes. More interesting are the ailurophobes, who run from cats. Or lutraphobes, who cower before the otter. Or zemmiphobes, who are haunted by the giant mole rat. It is hard to escape the conclusion that our compulsive attempts to name our fears are in fact an apotropaic defense against them. From *A* to *Z*, to judge by our lexicon, to live *is* to fear, to live in fear.

All this raises several questions. If fear is everywhere and nowhere, in all things and no things, how are we to make sense of it at all? How, intellectually, can we cope with its breadth and depth? We habitually say that we see fear, that we smell it, touch it, breathe it. But how, after all is said and done, do we *know* it?

The articles in this forum help us with just this question—how fear is variously constituted as an object of knowledge. They are selected from the workshop “Fear: Multidisciplinary Perspectives,” held on 12 April 2008 at Princeton’s Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies. A distinguished group of scholars from the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences (and one novelist) gathered there to reflect on the predispositions

they and their disciplines bring to bear on the phenomenon of fear, broadly construed. Some opted to present synoptic overviews; others, case studies. The result was a genuinely diverse set of contributions. Ruth Leys, a historian of science, addressed post-1960s psychological scholarship on affect. A philosopher, Vincent McCarthy, presented on Kierkegaard's treatment of anxiety. Richard McNally, an experimental psychologist and clinician, shifted our focus from the philosophical to the practical with a masterful overview of anxiety disorders. An economic historian, Harold James, presented a timely retrospect on the stock market panic of 1929. A leading neuroscientist, Arne Öhman, surveyed the most recent research on the neurobiological foundations of fear, while a film scholar, Adam Lowenstein, presented on the genre of the horror film. Finally, Europe's most famous crime novelist, Henning Mankell, brought our workshop to a conclusion with remarks about fear as a literary device.<sup>1</sup>

The unstated goal of the workshop was to break down barriers between social-scientific and natural-scientific approaches to fear.<sup>2</sup> It therefore came as a surprise to discover how these boundaries, against our own intentions, were so readily reconstituted. As Lorraine Daston has remarked, developing a language beyond the terms of the hoary nature-versus-nurture distinction "would require nothing less than the functional equivalent of a discipline's collective psychotherapy."<sup>3</sup> But what would such therapy entail? And what new view would it produce? Suppose, for a moment, that humanities scholars and life scientists joined one another on the proverbial couch. What kind of landscape would reveal itself after the old edifice had been destroyed and the rubble cleared away?

Destroying the old edifice requires first that we reveal it for what it is—a toxic bequest, of use in its time, but no longer. Most proximately, this bequest can be traced to a change in the understanding of emotions over the course of the nineteenth century. In the work of Darwin, Carl Lange, and later William James, emotions appeared as hard-wired, evolutionarily determined bodily reactions to objects or outer stimuli. Fear in particular became the "alpha emotion in the hierarchy of human affects," at once the most archaic and most modern of emotions.<sup>4</sup> As Darwin wrote in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), "fear was expressed from an extremely remote period, in almost the same manner as it is now in man."<sup>5</sup> This new view overturned earlier ideas, in which fear was regarded as a passion subject to volition, imagination, and an ethical will.<sup>6</sup>

The developmental psychologist Jerome Kagan long ago called attention to the poverty of individual words or phrases to describe emotional states. Summing up a lifetime of experimental research, Kagan offered this suggestion: "Let us agree to a moratorium on the use of single words, such as *fear*, . . . and write about emotional processes with full sentences rather than

ambiguous, naked concepts.”<sup>7</sup> The articles presented in this forum follow Kagan’s lead, insofar as they mount a sustained attack on the emotional order to which we are heir. To some degree, however, their combined effect is misleading. Divorced from the broader context of the forum, which set these pieces in conversation with leading statements from the life sciences, it is easy to come away with the impression that they comprise yet another salvo in the old debate we had originally aimed to undo. Caveats aside, however, they at least reveal alternative categories—in the instance of this forum, motifs of admixture, mediation, and temporality above all—through which to pursue the problem of how we know fear.

Everyday experience would seem to confirm Kagan’s point about the admixture of feeling. Any visit to an amusement park roller coaster will do. Faces marked at once by pleasure and terror attest to a composite *Angstlust* in vivo.<sup>8</sup> Or at least they seem to. What facial expression can actually tell us is a matter of heated academic debate and biopolitical significance. For example, facial testimony animates the work of psychologist Paul Ekman, associated with the most prominent contemporary effort to identify “basic” emotions independent of time and place. Ekman gained notoriety for a series of studies in which he traversed Papua New Guinea asking isolated villagers to identify the emotions on the faces of photographed persons from cultures they had never before encountered. Later, he was made editor of Darwin’s book on the expression of emotions in man and animal. And he has more recently become an expert in facial-recognition techniques, feted in the popular press, and highly sought after by law enforcement agencies. He has the peculiar distinction of having become at once a foremost resource in the global “war on terror” and the author of a series of self-help books designed to aid the aggrieved half of fractious couples to determine when their partners lie.<sup>9</sup>

The first article in our forum, by Ruth Leys, calls both the conclusions and presuppositions of Ekman’s foundational experiments into question. Leys focuses on the role of photographs in Ekman’s studies. In fact, her contribution might be read as one prolonged plea for taking the mediality and temporality of Ekman’s photos more seriously. Of course, these problems long preceded Ekman’s own experiments. Doubts about the ability of photography to capture the display of emotions on the site of the human face set in, Leys reports, with Darwin himself. Exposure times of cameras in the 1860s lasted several seconds, which meant that the subject had to keep still and “conserve” the emotion on her face. The problems with such an approach are numerous. For one, if the face truly is an embodiment of emotion, then such faces were at best embodiments of staged emotions, embodiments of feigned

affect—the faces, in other words, of the fake. As Leys points out, this was one of several methodological deficiencies plaguing Ekman’s early experiments, a deficiency that endures, albeit in more complicated fashion, both in the filmic evidence at the core of Ekman’s later work and in one of the dominant natural-scientific approaches to visually registering emotions today: the “still” photographs of fMRI and PET brain scans.

The dispute about what such photographs and films can tell us hinges on a deeper set of arguments about the kind of entity that fear is and the kind of self that experiences, expresses, or lives it. Roughly, we might speak of two competing positions: so-called “intentionalist” and “nonintentionalist” theories of fear. The first is sometimes associated with psychoanalysis and phenomenology, the second typically with neuroscience. The first foregrounds questions of meaning and belief; the second tends to separate feeling from cognition. In sum, the two hinge on competing understandings of self and world. Nonintentionalist theories are thought to posit a discrete subject over and against the object world. Intentionalist theories, by contrast, speak of a porous, open, socially mediated self, and of fear as always attached to the specific objects with which they are associated.

Leys fits squarely in the intentionalist camp. So does Adam Lowenstein, whose essay in this forum addresses *Land of the Dead* (2005), the fourth horror film in director George Romero’s legendary “Living Dead” series. Lowenstein takes the film as an occasion to inveigh against so-called cognitivist approaches to thinking about audience terror—elicited by the horror genre in particular, and in more occulted fashion by the medium of film in general. “No physiological sensors or strategic interviews or questionnaire results can ever tell the whole story about . . . how exactly spectators interact with a film,” he writes. Indeed, he thinks it is folly to say that the fear induced in moviegoers is a matter of stimulus generalization: that our fear of zombies in the theater is just another version of the fear we feel in the real world at the sight of the monstrous, distorted, deformed, and impure.

Instead, Lowenstein suggests we think of horror films as enacting a “cinema of attractions” (in the critic Tom Gunning’s phrase). Or better, *recalling* such a cinema: for the cinema of attractions was one of the roads not taken once Hollywood’s cinema of narrative pleasures marginalized its competitors. Against the temporality of narrative, this argument has it, the cinema of attractions prized deferral, belatedness, and retrospection—a dramatization, say, of a Freudian psyche hard at work rearranging and retranscribing memories, or strategically deferring action on experiences impossible for the subject to integrate at the moment of their occurrence. If Hollywood privileged the time of narrative, the “cinema of attractions” preferred what Lowenstein calls the “allegorical moment.”

There is a certain irony in Lowenstein's use of the phrase. It recalls, after all, Sergei Eisenstein's notion of a "montage of attractions"—a theory of film that held that moviegoers could be transformed into proletarianized subjects not, or not only, with suitably ideological stories (for example, *Battleship Potemkin*), but on the assumption that the formal elements of a film could "train" viewers by means of a Pavlovian mechanism of stimulus and response. In other words, the "montage of attractions" imported the laboratory into the theater, whereas Lowenstein's work implicitly asks us to think, as does Leys, about how the fantasmatic and theatrical constructions of fear reassert themselves within the sterile confines of the lab.

Here, then, is where Lowenstein can help us think about Ekman and the approach to fear he represents. As Leys points out, Ekman's early work was roundly criticized, in part for its use of staged faces frozen in the form of synchronic snapshots. Ekman answered his critics, Margaret Mead among them, by turning to faces invested with diachrony and movement instead—in other words, to faces on film. His later experiments monitored the facial expressions of test-subjects exposed to traumatic or disturbing films, on the assumption that involuntary "micro-movements" reveal the truth of our feelings. But Lowenstein works on a medium whose success as an art form would seem to hinge on the ability to fake just what Ekman claims cannot be feigned. And if we take Lowenstein seriously, we realize that there is much more of the theater in the lab than we are accustomed to think. To describe what transpires in Ekman's lab requires that we consider how the fantasmatic and theatrical temporalities of fear play out in laboratory experiments predicated on their exclusion.

Just how powerful this temporal play can be is illustrated in the third of our contributions, by the economic historian Harold James. At first glance, James's essay may appear unrelated to the concerns animating Lowenstein and Leys. There is no talk, for example, of intentionalism, of psychoanalysis, or of cognitive science, let alone of snakes and zombies. There is instead a careful, lucid analysis of the stock market panic of 1929: first, a review of the economic explanations that have been marshaled and rejected to account for it; and second, a survey of the strange temporalities at work in the psychology of mass panic. James concludes that it was not this or that economic event so much as a sense of history—a sense for radical alternatives to the present embedded in a dystopian, concocted fantasy of the past—that accounts for the course of events. "History actually induced the sense of crisis," James reports. "Fear arises when deep historical experience suddenly reemerges and becomes alive as a possible version of the present."

By "history" James means something more like "historical imagination"—and a radically unstable, fantasmatic one at that. To take one example: observers of the crash unwittingly conflated the events of their day with

a historical predecessor, the collapse of Friday, September 24, 1869. As James points out, this seems to be the only way to account for one of the most curious dimensions of the panic—the fact that the collapse, which transpired on Thursday, October 24, came to be known, quickly and erroneously, as “Black Friday.” Those who watched the market crash, it turns out, shared something with Lowenstein’s moviegoers: a febrile, temporal imagination in which present could be past, past future, and future already lived. If there is an economic logic here, James suggests, it is difficult indeed to discern. The nature of fear means that market panics may not be amenable to market explanations (or at least not to those inspired by the “efficient markets hypothesis”). Ben Bernanke once claimed that “to understand the Great Depression is the Holy Grail of macroeconomics.” But if James is right, the social scientists and policy makers are doomed to failure. Their search is more like the Grail quest—“fundamentally futile”—than they may care to admit, and this futility is born of erroneous ideas about what fear is and how it is best known.

There is a final, important series of questions animating the contributions to this forum. Who sets the tone in contemporary debates about fear? And to what effect? In recent years, the natural sciences have displaced, occluded, even excluded humanist discussions of fear. This trend, in which debates on “eternal” questions of humanity (free will, the self, emotions) moved from the domain of the humanities to the domain of the life sciences, only accelerated after 9/11. It is not difficult to understand why. Whatever the contemporary status of C. P. Snow’s “two cultures,” the natural sciences offer a seductive promise that the humanities cannot: empirically derived certainties for society of the kind manufactured within the confines of their experiments. Ekman’s faces, for example, have moved out of laboratories and into our airports in the form of SPOT (Screening Passengers by Observational Techniques) machines, stationed at fourteen U.S. airports to register the “micro-expressions” of passengers, now coded as potential terrorists.<sup>10</sup> Critics of SPOT, Ekman writes,

have said that it is an unnecessary invasion of privacy, based on an untested method of observation, that is unlikely to yield much in the way of red-handed terrorists set on blowing up a plane or flying it into a building, but would violate fliers’ civil rights. I disagree. I’ve participated in four decades’ worth of research into deception and demeanor, and I know that researchers have amassed enough knowledge about how someone who is lying looks and behaves that it would be negligent not to use it in the search for terrorists. Along with luggage checks, radar screening, bomb-sniffing dogs and the rest of our security arsenal, observational techniques can help reduce risks—and potentially prevent another deadly assault like the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, there was the counterbalance of writings—across the disciplines, spanning political science to medicine—on the politics of fear, penned with the aim of shifting public attention to fear as it is manipulated and produced.<sup>12</sup> But on the whole, the natural sciences have been spectacularly adept at exporting their laboratory principle to society as a whole: just as fear must be stimulated or simulated in the lab in order to measure it, so fear must be nourished and then contained, or, more precisely, nourished in order to be contained by a government at the ready.

Need this be the case? It is a difficult question to answer. Whatever new insights the human sciences might offer into the process of how fear is constituted—as a phenomenon and as an object of knowledge—it remains to be seen whether such insights can be of use in public discussion, and if so, how they are to insinuate themselves into the public arena in the first place. If the essays presented here are any measure by which to judge, the first question ought to receive a qualified yes. The second question must remain open for now. In the end, it is a matter of political struggle.

## Notes

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“Fear” was Princeton’s Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies theme for 2007–08. For the invitation to convene the workshop we are most grateful to Gyan Prakash, the director of the center at the time, and to Stephen Kotkin. Both participated vigorously in the workshop, as did that year’s fellow class. We would also like to thank Lorraine Daston, Carla Hesse, and Ruth Leys for comments and for answering queries. On the workshop, see Franziska Exeler, “Im Fadenkreuz von Biologie und Kultur: Neurochemische Reaktion oder historisches Phänomen? Multidisziplinäre Tagung über Angst an der Princeton University,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 18 April 2008.

1. All contributions including those by Jan Mieszkowski, Corey Robin, and Jan Plamper not mentioned here will be published in the volume *Fear: Across the Disciplines* (Pittsburgh, forthcoming).
2. One recent work in particular, William Reddy’s *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge, 2001), struck us as a useful model: it combines the universalism of cognitive psychology with the attention to cultural difference found in much anthropological research.
3. Lorraine Daston, personal communication, 25 June 2009; quoted with permission.
4. Jerome Kagan, *What Is Emotion? History, Measures, and Meanings* (New Haven, 2007), 14.
5. Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London, 1872), 362.
6. See, for example, Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge, 2003), 18–19, 22, 48, 60–61; Katherine Rowe, “Humoral Knowledge and Liberal Cognition in Davenant’s *Macbeth*,” in

- Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion*, ed. Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe, and Mary Floyd-Wilson (Philadelphia, 2004), 181–82; and for a plea to allow room for the unconscious and fantasy in shaping individual anxieties, Nancy J. Chodorow, *The Power of Feelings: Personal Meanings in Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Culture* (New Haven, 1999), esp. chap. 6.
7. Kagan, *What Is Emotion?* 216. Kagan's injunction is in fact a modern update to an ancient precursor. As rhetorician Daniel Gross reminds us, Aristotle held that emotions such as fear, though often coded as "hardwired," are in fact instigated by "a series of enabling conditions obscured by our platitudes of biology." Gross's survey of the passions from late antiquity through the early-modern era to the most recent regime of "brain science" leaves the concept of "basic emotions" impoverished indeed; Daniel M. Gross, *The Secret History of Emotion: From Aristotle's "Rhetoric" to Modern Brain Science* (Chicago, 2006), 2.
  8. On *Angstlust* see the psychoanalyst/physician Michael Balint, *Thrills and Regressions* (New York, 1959), translated into German as *Angstlust und Regression* (Stuttgart, 1991).
  9. On Paul Ekman see <www.paulekman.com> and Antony J. Chapman, Wendy Conroy, Noel Sheehy, eds., *Biographical Dictionary of Psychology* (New York, 1997), s.v. "Ekman, Paul." Criticism of the "basic emotions" approach has hinged on two points. First, psychologists cannot agree on the number of purportedly cross-cultural, timeless emotions. Second, the areas in the brain where these basic emotions are supposed to universally take place remain under dispute. For critiques of emotions scholarship from the life sciences, the best place to get started is the summary by insider neuroscientist Richard J. Davidson, "Seven Sins in the Study of Emotion: Correctives from Affective Neuroscience," *Brain and Cognition* 52, no. 1 (June 2003): 129–32.
  10. They also moved into popular culture: witness Fox's television show *Lie to Me*. Paul Ekman is scientific consultant; the character of Dr. Cal Lightman is based on Ekman.
  11. Paul Ekman, "How to Spot a Terrorist on the Fly," *Washington Post*, 29 October 2006.
  12. The historian of emotions Peter Stearns claims this kind of awareness-raising credit for his *American Fear: The Causes and Consequences of High Anxiety* (New York, 2006). See Jan Plamper, "The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns," *History and Theory* 49, no. 2 (May 2010): 264. Political scientist Corey Robin's *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (New York, 2004) and medical doctor Marc Siegel's *False Alarm: The Truth About the Epidemic of Fear* (Hoboken, NJ, 2005) have had a similar effect.