

INTRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT: This opening chapter illustrates the aim of the book by outlining the subject. It approaches the concept of contemporary phobias, trauma and cultural memory, defines the research question and explains the methodology of the study. Furthermore, it provides an overview of the book's structure and briefly introduces the other chapters.

While we were coordinating the PriMED project (www.primed_miur.it) on social integration and interreligious dialogue, which for Roma Tre University was coordinated by the Humanities Department and the Educational Science Department, we organized numerous educational and outreach activities related to otherness, diversity, and countering racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia.

Together with those fears, in that period, a new collective fear, unprecedented for almost any living generation in the contemporary world, was able to paralyze millions of people and nail them to a feeling of terrorized panic that lasted for months.

The fear generated by the Covid-19 pandemic was the latest so far in a series of collective phobias that have swept across the world in recent decades and were driven by the feeling that the future held something different (and worse) not only from what we had envisioned and projected as a common expectation, but from what we had grown accustomed to experiencing (see Graziano's contribution in this volume).

The idea of a different and worse life began to feed the collective imaginaries following the eruption of traumas to which, after years of moderate pacification, democratic transition, economic development and social welfare in the so-called Western world, no one was accustomed anymore.

And it is with an awareness of the risk of using the categories of "us" and "them" as the best anthropologists from the past century to the present

have taught us, that we want to point out how that “us” consisting of the inhabitants of a certain area of the Earth has ended up becoming a world-wide “us”.

Fear has become the predominant feeling not only for a certain part of humanity, irresponsibly relying on the good life to which they are accustomed, but of all the inhabitants of the earth.

It is about splits, tears, disruptions from what is considered the norm and normal.

We know how event-trauma, or rather what is considered trauma, marks history and memory, and conversely, memory is capable of nurturing or dampening the power of trauma.

This happens on both a personal and a collective level and plays out on the double track of remembering and forgetting. One selects what one must and wants to remember but also what one must and wants to forget. As Assmann taught us in his studies on Cultural Memory, it often depends on whether violence was suffered or perpetrated, but not only that. As Alexander (2012, 14-15) writes:

“Traumatic status is attributed to real or imagined phenomena, not because of their actual harmfulness or their objective abruptness, but because these phenomena are believed to have abruptly, and harmfully, affected collective identity. (...) Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity. Collective actors “decide” to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go”.

The history of trauma is the result of a shared convention and classification that nurtures a collective memory. In this sense there is no history of trauma, but a narrative (or multiple narratives) of a possible history of trauma.

And as he writes later (Alexander 2012, 26):

“Experiencing trauma can be understood as a sociological process that defines a painful injury to the collectivity, establishes the victim, attributes responsibility, and distributes the ideal and material consequences. Insofar as traumas are so experienced, and thus imagined and represented, the collective identity will shift. This reconstruction means that there will be a searching re-remembering of the collective past, for memory is not only social and fluid but also deeply connected to the contemporary sense of the self. Identities are continuously constructed and secured not only by facing the present and future but also by reconstructing the collectivity’s earlier life”.

What is at stake is the construction of a cultural memory through cultural formations communication and the incorporation of it into an official and public memory. The official history of modern fears will also be constructed and narrated on the basis of personal, cultural and public memory.

One traces, trivial to remember, the detonation of collective contemporary fear to September 11, 2001, when for the first time in decades, in an overt, visible and visualized way, random death invaded the urban space of one of the seemingly safest, most vital, most dynamic, most vibrant cities. Most vibrant and least religious. Yet, it was religion and a certain reading of religion that corroborated the history and memory of that event. September 11, whatever the historically established facts may have been, the day of the deaths of hundreds of innocent victims, marked the beginning of a “terrified collective feeling”, not only and not so much by the random and unjustified death made possible even in the safest place in the world, but, to put it briefly, by Islam. That day in 2001 ushered in the spread of a sense of belonging to a cultural (and religious) us that also reached the extreme as dangerous synthesis of us and them, the West and Islam. Even those who wanted to interpret the geopolitics reinforced, if not triggered, by 9/11 in such dichotomous terms did not emphasize that everyone shared the same sentiment: on the one hand fear of Islam, on the other hand fear of the spread of a visceral and unmediated sentiment that would technically be called Islamophobia.

Fear was replacing other feelings, such as hope, trust, serenity. Fear accompanied by aversion, anger, hatred. Fear of the other than oneself was expressed in reference to the culturally and, notably, religiously different. A new era began, in which of the double bond of religion with fear, it was the latter that was consolidated and entrenched. From one side, every culture and religion was born and has been fed by the fear of the loss or impossibility of controlling life, death, illness, pain, the end. From the other side, collective imaginaries feed clichés, stereotypes, in particular toward minorities, diversities and other cultures. Within this frame, religions can be both an answer to, or a cause of fears. Since 2001, religion has been scarier than offering comfort to fear.

Since that time, other collective fears would invade the world, fuelling a feeling of alarm and insecurity resting on diverse and not only cultural factors, intertwining, multiplying, nurturing and allowing stratifications of different fears and for different causes to settle. Diversity induces fear, where difference may be a language, a culture, a religion, but also a social, economic, physical condition compared to what is considered normal, compared to what we are familiar with, compared to what has been normalized, compared to what is taken for granted.

As Zerubavel (2018) taught us among all that we take for granted, cus-

toms, cultural facts, language habits, we are not used to reflect on how much our ways of saying, doing and being are always social facts, socially connoted.

Different crises, for different factors, have followed one another since 2001: the economic crisis, the environmental crisis, the pandemic crisis, the crisis related to ongoing wars. None has been overcome, but they have been juxtaposed and have increased the range of collective fears, sometimes narcotized by ephemeral antidotes that have no power over the disruptive force of the various forms of terror that cyclically reappear and re-propose. In the year in which we write this introduction, Islamophobia still exists, as does fear of poverty, terror over war, distrust of the means of environmental protection (Gervasio, Giorda and De Paolis; Giorgi in this book).

Focusing on the many fears that involve people around the world, history, sociology, pedagogy, psychology and anthropology can help to recognize the irrational aspects of such fears and to reflect on the us-them dichotomy by overcoming opposition and prejudice and by considering diversity a factor of empowering our identities as individuals and as social groups (see Catarci and Fiorucci; Perucchini, Gabrielli and McCormack).

The field of research on emotions is in its historical developments and has become increasingly multidisciplinary behind the driving force of the so-called *Emotional Turn* (Stearns 1985; Hitzer 2011): traversed by the humanities, social sciences, psychological and cognitive studies, between universalism and socio-constructivism, with different positions leaving the field open to different perspectives and hypotheses.

Within it, the feeling of fear represents one of the subfields that has attracted the scientific attention of many scholars, especially historians, for several decades (Gironda and Tolomelli 2015). We can consider a pioneer Georges Lefebvre observing the first phase of revolutionary politics in 1932, focusing on the French Revolution, followed by *La peur en Occident, XIV^e-XVIII^e siècles*, in 1978, and *Une cité assiégée* by Jean Delumeau (see Merluzzi in this volume).

If fear is, as Gironda and Tolomelli remind us citing Bourke, “a powerful driving force in the history of humanity” (Bourke 2005, XII), it can be studied not only from different disciplinary perspectives, but by considering different spatialities of vantage points, in a historical frame: individual and collective fear, private and public fear, social, cultural, political and religious fear, fear from below, of citizens and fear from above, of institutions. These are physical and symbolic spatialities that this miscellaneous volume ambitiously sought to occupy and investigate.

In particular, within such an ocean of fears, this volume focuses on some examples of cultural fears related to different cultures and religions in

a diachronically perspective (Merluzzi; Chambers; Proglío), starting from Ancient Greek models (Giuseppetti) and from a multidisciplinary perspective, which includes Religious Studies (De Paolis, Gervasio and Giorda; Giorgi; Becker), political science (Graziano), psycho-educational (Perucchini, Gabrielli and McCormack) and pedagogical (Catarci and Fiorucci).

Some of these forms of fear were provoked or sublimated by religious fundamentalisms and a double ignorance (ignorance *of* and *about* fundamentalisms) and have been contributing to feeding these collective worries and despair.

Through a multiple sample of stereotypes, mystifications and simplifications, the authors look at the power of nowadays globalized collective fears. Massimo Giuseppetti explains how in the broader context of the multiple religious experiences in place in the Ancient Greek world, the fear of the gods was a crucial factor in the conceptualization of proper ethical behaviour. Fear of divine powers was a social standing but also was used to implement very different political agendas.

In his chapter, Manfredi Merluzzi stresses how, from modern times, fear has been used as an important factor in constructing social and cultural consensus and social unity, to endorse policies, to strengthen power systems. Continuous perception of external and internal threats have been generating a widespread feeling of fear as a widespread social sentiment.

In his contribution Iain Chambers suggests to link present-day fears over migration to deeper histories in the forging of Europe through elements usually considered extraneous and foreign: Islam, Arab culture and the Ottoman Empire.

In the same path, the chapter of Gabriele Proglío analyzes from a historical perspective some mobilities of food and people in the Mediterranean to dismantle a white-European imaginary in the area and stressing how many different interruptions have marked its history so far.

Manlio Graziano focuses on the dynamic of a increasing collective fear in the last decenies: a great international disorder triggered by the collapse of the Yalta order, was further exacerbated by the crises of 2008 and 2020, generating a state of uncertainty, confusion and apprehension

Alberta Giorgi explains how the Muslim Question essentializes Islam as a homogeneous actor through the 'othering' processes which combine gender, religious, and ethnic dimensions in complex identity assemblages of 'us' and 'them'. Exploring one Italian iteration of the narrative of replacement she focuses on how it is articulated by the First report on Islamization of Europe, published in 2019 by a think tank connected to the current leading party in the Italian government.

Marco Catarci and Massimiliano Fiorucci in their chapter focus on the

use of intercultural approaches to education to promote dialogue and cultural exchange amongst natives and foreigners, tackling various forms of diversity (cultural, gender, social class, etc.) and different intercultural approaches: political, critical and transformative.

Carmen Becker theorizes the figure of the refugee in order to provide the conceptual framework for a case study based on some refugees' histories. Mixing the coded, analyzed, and theorized data from her ethnographic participant observation with the help of maxqda, a software for qualitative data analysis, she aims to connect the micro level of daily interaction and practices to the meso and macro levels of discourses, structures and institutions.

Paola Perucchini, Sara Gabrielli and Bryan McCormack reflect on the fear created by migration flows both in 'us' and 'others'. They present the Yesterday-Today-Tomorrow's (YTT's) learning program to promote human rights, which has been used with displaced populations in refugee's camps and with primary school children to reduce prejudice toward migrants.

Isabella de Paolis, Gennaro Gervasio and Maria Chiara Giorda shed light on the self-representations and the fears emerging from within the Muslim communities in Italy today. Thanks to a privileged corpus of primary sources made of interviews realized within the activities of PriMED project.

The chapters of this volume explore the possibilities of some cultural antidotes to phobias, such as new awareness and knowledge related to diversities, based on an open education to interculturality and plural citizenship, that can be "another" way to tackle the fear.

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