

Corey Robin.**Fear: The History of a Political Idea.**

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Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, fear has played a crucial role in US politics. During the last presidential campaign, for example, the Republican team ran a television ad featuring menacing wolves roaming a dark forest. Simultaneously, a woman announcer warned voters that “weakness attracts those who are waiting to do America harm.” (Associated Press, 2004) In the context of a campaign centered on terrorism and national security, no one could miss the Republican message: only George W. Bush can adequately protect the United States against the terrorizing army of terrorist wolves. Only a few weeks before the ad appeared on television, Robb Willer, a young sociologist from Cornell University, published an online paper demonstrating that fear toward terrorism clearly advantaged the Republican President. Using time-series analyses, Willer showed that the Post-September 11 terror warnings have consistently increased popular support for the Republican President (Willer, 2004).

In a well calculated marketing exercise, Oxford University Press launched Corey Robin’s *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* in the middle of the 2004 presidential campaign. Offering a US perspective on the status of fear in politics and political theory, this book seemed so timely that many media outlets, including the *New York Review of Books*, reviewed it immediately after its release (for example: Judt, 2004). Yet, Robin conceived his book project several years before the events of September 11. The product of a PhD dissertation completed at Yale University in 1999, *Fear* says relatively little about these events and their political consequences. Adopting a long-term historical perspective, the book explores the history of the concept of fear in modern political theory before turning to contemporary US political and economic processes in which fear is featured prominently. The book covers a lot of ground, and the two parts are loosely related together: the first one is about the history of political ideas, the second one about concrete issues that range from McCarthyism to the role of fear in the US workplace. What unites this eclectic book are the claims that fear cannot represent a genuine foundation to the liberal political order, and that US civil society and political institutions are instrumental in creating “repressive fear” in society. Rejecting the “liberalism of fear” based on the claim that the fear of terror is the main source of legitimacy for liberal institutions, Robin wishes that the US left will move beyond the communitarian illusions regarding the virtues of civil society in order to launch a new crusade for justice and equality that would crush “repressive fear” ever present in the US economy and polity. Through the book, the author attempts to demonstrate that political fear is a repressive tool that reinforces unequal power relations in American society. As this overview suggests, *Fear* is an original mix of political theory and historical analysis that leads to the formulation of a rather vague political project for the US left.

Reflecting the subtitle of the book, the first part reconstructs the history of the idea of fear in modern political theory. This part focuses on four well-known theorists: Hobbes, Montesquieu, Tocqueville, and Arendt. Robin admits that he feels closer to Hobbes, who theorized fear as a central aspect of politics that state and civil society institutions can shape and reshape in order to serve the sovereign’s needs (chapter 1). Hobbes viewed fear as something persisting in politics and society, within and

beyond the state of nature. According to Robin, Montesquieu offered a very different perspective on political fear (chapter 2). In *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu depicted fear as the political weapon of despots, not as a form of power ever present in all political systems. “Where Hobbesian fear was a tool of political order, serving ruler and ruled alike, Montesquieu believed that terror satisfied only the depraved needs of a savage despot.” (p. 52) While Hobbes thought that fear proved essential to the maintenance of political and social order, Montesquieu argued that the suppression of despotic fear represented the objective of constitutional and political reform. Like many liberals after him, Montesquieu turned to the fear of despotic terror as the foundation for the liberal political order he supported. For Montesquieu, the distinction between despotic fear and liberal security justified the division of power promoted in *The Spirit of the Laws*. Turning to another famous French liberal, Robin shows how Tocqueville focused on another possible form of despotism: the tyranny of the democratic multitude, which is grounded in a personal anxiety stemming from the lack of traditional authority and integrative structures that characterize democratic modernity (chapter 3). As Robin argues, Tocqueville saw this modern anxiety as a new type of fear that could lead to the creation of a tyranny of the majority. The analysis of Tocqueville’s discussion about democratic anxiety paves the way to the examination of Arendt’s work on totalitarianism (chapter 4). In his presentation, Robin opposes two of Arendt’s books: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which argues that ideology and mass anxiety favour the emergence of totalitarian terror, and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which shows how individuals pursuing mundane career goals participate in the construction of a totalitarian order. If *The Origins of Totalitarianism* puts forward a historically flawed analysis of totalitarianism, Robin contends, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* offers a far more insightful analysis of political fear rooted in the idea that mundane behaviour and personal ambition can feed terror. After this brilliant analysis of classical political theory, Robin concludes the first part of his book with a discussion of Judith Shklar’s “liberalism of fear” (chapter 5). In search of a new foundation for liberalism, Shklar and other contemporary theorists turned to terror as a negative foundation for liberal institutions, which are legitimate because they protect citizens against this radical threat. Noting the influence of Montesquieu on this new form of liberalism, Robin finds a similar type of argument in the post-September 11 discourse about how the terrorist threat has rejuvenated US democracy and society. For Robin, depicting terrorism as an external source of political fear that legitimizes US institutions obscures the little known fact that these very institutions constantly generate oppressive fear.

The three chapters that comprise the second part of the book show how US political, social, and economic institutions regularly produce repressive fears that reinforce inequality over time. Drawing on the scholarship about McCarthyism, the first of these chapters underlines the plurality of actors involved in the fabrication of political fear. In addition to elites, collaborators, bystanders, and the victims themselves play a central role in that process (chapter 6). This chapter also underlines the cooperation between elite members necessary for the production of repressive political fear like the one stemming from McCarthyism. In the following chapter, Robin draws on the same example to demonstrate that US political and social institutions can prove instrumental in the dissemination of repressive fear (chapter 7). Concerning political institutions, he argues that, far from making repression impossible, institutional fragmentation at the federal level can give tremendous power to potentially repressive actors controlling congressional committees and other autonomous sites of power. Furthermore, federalism multiplies the potential sources of repressive fear. Regarding civil society, Robin points to the fact that social and economic actors, far from representing a universal obstacle to the propagation of political fear, can collaborate—and also with the political elite—in

order to propagate repression and fear. Drawing on the idea that civil society actors can produce repressive fear on a daily basis, the final chapter turns to the US workplace, which is depicted as a site of social control and repressive fear that maintains unequal power relations (chapter 8). Neo-Marxists and students of social control may find little new in that chapter, which offers a bleak overview of psychological and physical domination in the workplace. The author concludes his book with a call to the left to abandon communitarianism and the “liberalism of fear” in order to renew the struggle against domination and inequality in US society. For Robin, fear is a tool of domination, not the foundation for a just social and political order.

This is an original, provocative, and well-written book that should spark much debate inside and outside the academia. Robin has a great knowledge of the history of political ideas, and some of his interpretations are quite refreshing. Little has been written about the history of the idea of fear, and this book constitutes a landmark in that regard. Yet, the author’s almost exclusive focus on the way political actors inflict repressive fear obscures the possible role of the state in the reduction of social, economic, and political insecurity. This is probably due to the fact that the author depicts fear mainly as the product of political machinations, not something that the state can fight through specific public policies. Depending on the historical moment and the issue at stake, the modern state can both reduce and increase the level of fear and insecurity that citizens experience in their everyday life. In the second part of the book, Robin focuses almost exclusively on the negative role of the state, forgetting one of the most crucial lessons of Hobbes. Furthermore, Robin does little to compare the US with other societies and political systems. This relative lack of comparative perspective makes his argument about US political institutions and civil society less compelling. Furthermore, authors that have offered interesting sociological and historical insight about the politics of fear are not even mentioned in the book. For example, Charles Tilly’s account on the analogy between state making and organized crime could have helped the author develop a more dynamic analysis of the relationship between fear and state building (Tilly, 1985). Not that far from the Hobbesian view that Robin cherishes, Tilly’s approach provides a good starting point for the analysis of insecurity and state power in contemporary society (Béland, 2005). From Foucault to Marx, many other theorists could have helped Robin to develop a more subtle—and sociological— understanding of the politics of fear. Finally, the author barely deals with electoral politics in his book. Even during repressive moments such as McCarthyism, politicians seek election and re-election. What is the relationship between electoral politics and fear? How do politicians use fear to increase their popular support? Paradoxically, the book Oxford University Press launched during the middle of a presidential campaign centered on fear has little interesting to say about electoral politics! The problem is that Robin, like too many theorists, does not start from the perspective that society is divided into fields of action that operate according to their own specific rules. As Bourdieu and others have shown, the political field is grounded in a different logic than the economic field, for example (Bourdieu, 2000). Because he indistinctly applies his theory of political fear to the democratic polity and the workplace, Robin obscures the crucial institutional and cultural variations between two fields of action that follow widely different logics. Despite its unilateral view on fear and its lack of comparative and sociological depth, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* is an exciting and stimulating book that students of politics should read and engage with.

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