Fear on the March

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Abstract: After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the great fear that formerly attended the threat of nuclear warfare has been replaced by other more intangible and disturbing fears: first a fear of migrants, then a fear of Islamic terrorism, and finally a fear of a traditionally persecuted minority like the Roma people. The politics now marketed, the entirety of the slogans now adopted by the political parties, specifically emphasise such fears. In the first pace, the slogans of the Right feed and spread these fears precisely in order to enhance their own legitimacy. Along with such slogans, and sometimes in the closest connection with them, there operates a potent mechanism of fear: the totality of the press and the television media, and all the ways by means of which this diffuse social imaginary is produced. If the world of politics were a market – and it looks as if that is what it has now become – one could say that the principal commodity on offer is exactly fear. As in the economic market, the “political agents” sell themselves, in this case by disseminating throughout the social body a fear which claims that it alone is conducive to real security. And this means that the process of political competition transpires almost entirely within a “persecutory” perspective in accordance with victimising model of the scapegoat. Thus civil rights are the first things that come under threat: in the short term the civil rights of the victims, and in the long term those of the “citizens” as well.

Dr. Pangloss and the Others

Hatred – according to Adolf Hitler1 “the only stable emotion” – is the most reliable of political sentiments: more than any other, hatred “binds together” a multitude of human beings and turns them into an obedient collective. It is necessary to exploit its cohesive power, and first of all necessary to produce it, to intensify it, to disseminate it, if we are to encourage the masses to march. The Führer of the Thousand Year Reich, which with hatred and in hatred set an entire nation on the march, was quite certain of this. And the numer-

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2 The practical objective of every totalitarian system is precisely that of organising the greatest possible number of people in its ranks and encouraging them to march along with it, as Hannah Arendt has observed: See H. Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951), New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973.

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ous and triumphant agents of political consensus today are certain of it too—
though here it would be preferable to speak of the numerous and triumphant
agents of fear. For those who would get hearts and minds to march, hate is the
by-product of an even more reliable emotion.

Fear is this emotion which produces hatred. For some time now, fear is
the “commodity” which is increasingly offered and increasingly sought in the
market of political consensus, also, and above all, in Italy. And now it is also
appearing in the lexicon of philosophers and political theorists who were con-
vinced, until recently, that it counted for little in the choices and decisions of
the voters, all imagined as rational individuals, as autonomous decision mak-
ers primarily concerned with assessing and comparing values, and, above all,
interests. These theorists were convinced, in short, that we all lived in the best
of all possible (political) worlds, and that it was enough to endorse and repre-
sent the relevant values and interests in order to gather the necessary votes.
It escaped the attention of these sophisticated modern representatives of Dr.
Pangloss that some very different analysts and intellectuals had been attempt-
ing for at least the last twenty years to construct a language (and an ideological
hegemony) by appeal to this sorry and destructive emotion. It also escaped
them that the world had been reshaped by this emotion, after the collapse, in
1989, of the old double order: an order which saw Us on one side and Them
on the other, the Empire of Good on one side, clear and well defined, and the
Empire of Evil on the other, equally clear and well defined.3

Convinced that they were living in an era finally liberated from ideology,
an era in which perhaps the end of history itself had arrived, these wretched
representatives of Dr. Pangloss became ever more sophisticated, ever more
certain that the triumphant cultural and political model of the time was pre-
cisely the best of all possible models, indeed the only possible model available.
In short, they had readily donned the spectacles of the devoted philosopher
of Baron Thunder-ten-tronckh, as recounted by Voltaire: those spectacles
whose reality, being the best of all possible realities, was supposedly demon-
strated by the reality of the noses on which, as everyone can clearly see, they
can most easily be placed.4

Others in the meantime, with keener eyesight and more adaptable prin-
ciples, were already mobilising the masses, or rather “the public,” as we have
long since learned to say in deference to the prevailing ideology. And to this
public they are still selling fear and hatred today, and thus obtaining in turn
the “audience” or consensus they require.

4 See the brilliant opening pages of Voltaire, Candide ou l’optimisme (1759) [Candide: or Optimism,
The Marketing of Security

If the political market place were actually a market – and it seems likely that it is becoming, or has indeed already become, one – we could say, with regard to “security,” that it is not the demand which creates the supply, but the supply the demand. In other words, the political agents “sell” themselves and their security credentials by creating and spreading fear, and thus also a need for security. What we are witnessing here is an evident reversal of the proper significance of the political: namely, to give a form to fear, to “contain” it, reduce it, overcome it. Or even: from its nothingness, from the negation (of meaning) that it represents, to produce a general structure of order.

From the perspective of philosophical anthropology, there is a sense in which the human being, lacking claws of its own, already “famished even by future hunger,” is the only animal that possesses fear (and creates fear). Since the human being is “gunfinished,” hindered by a body that lacks a biological and instinctual structure intrinsically adapted to satisfy its needs and keep it safe in a natural environment that immediately belongs to it, the surrounding world presents itself to such a creature as strange and unfamiliar, as teeming with danger. And yet this very fear, elaborated and transformed into symbolic forms and norms, becomes the foundation of another different world, one that is no longer immediately given to human beings, but one which they themselves construct as a product of their own needs and efforts. This metamorphosis of (natural) fear into (cultural) order lies at the origin of all that is distinctively human, of all that is worst and best about us. From this philosophical perspective, then, we must conclude that the world is founded in nothing. Or, to express this in another way: insofar as the world of human beings has no firm foundation, the entire self-construction of this world arises out of fear.

From another perspective, one more specific and more closely connected to the political and institutional dimension, we would expect to confirm the principle that the perception of fear, and thus the need and demand for security, would diminish in proportion to the effectiveness with which the political realm addresses the issue of security. And conversely, we would not expect the political realm to induce insecurity – to produce and disseminate fear – unless or to the extent that it is prepared to “deny” its own role and forfeit consensus. Yet for some time now, all this seems to have been reversed.

6 See Escobar, Metamorfosi, pp. 122 ff.
In a world that has been free, for almost twenty years, from the Great Fear – the fear sustained by two mutually hostile ideological and military blocks – there have now sprung up new fears that appear much less definable, much less controllable, and thus much less “containable,” much less susceptible to progressive engagement. The unambiguous threat of the “the bomb,” which bestowed some kind of stable and visible form upon the two empires, the Empire of Good and that of Evil, precisely because it was so unambiguous, has now yielded to other less graspable and more disturbing fears: first the generic fear of invasion by migrants of one kind or another, then the more “specifiable” fear of Islamic terrorism, and now, with particular intensity in Italy, the fear of the traditionally persecuted minority of the Roma. And such fears have been, and are increasingly, coupled with hatred. This too is a disturbing and ungraspable hatred, like the fears which effectively feed it.

The Enemy no longer stands out there in front of us. He no longer furnishes a mirror image of ourselves, confirming our own identity through its opposite, and thus encouraging us to recognise his identity too. Before us, even in our midst, we find a swarm of covert and deceitful invasive forces, of poisonous vermin, of insidious monsters. This is what we imagine. Or rather: this is what the current political scene – the entire range of political programmes and, above all, of political slogans – encourages us to imagine, now that it has abandoned the task of mastering these fears. On the contrary, the political scene exploits such fears, constantly nourished and disseminated as they are, precisely in order to legitimate itself. And all this transpires “in the marketplace,” where there is no longer any clear distinction between Left and Right, to employ a terminology which will strike many as already obsolete.

Again, for some time now, security is no longer simply about security, but has become – for politicians, for journalists, for commentators – the question of security. This linguistic slippage itself – from the thing (security) to the verbal commonplace regarding the thing (the question) – already suggests that in the market of consensus what really matters is not the satisfaction of the need for security, but the way in which it is marketed.

The Mechanism of Fear

Like every commonplace, the question of security is also a sedimentation within the social imaginary of a ceaseless operation of an entire system which produces – through processes of information both implicit and explicit, both direct and indirect – the words by which our diffuse and everyday forms of thought is nourished. And one can say that, today, this entire system operates as a true and proper mechanism of fear.
It is the newspapers, and even more effectively the television stations, which provide the “moving parts” for this mechanism. Through the stories of the press, and the images of the television, the difficulties, contradictions, and conflicts of social and political life are subjected to a “virtual” process of simplification. They are recounted and interpreted in terms of a schema, a commonplace perception, that turns them into a scapegoating mechanism. For readers and viewers, their own problems, great or small, appear as the results of a conspiracy whose perpetrators belong in the pre-eminent categories of the guilty: migrants, Islamicists, “ethnic criminals,” the destitute. For a good while now, in Italy, the Roma community has figured prominently in this respect, and has even been denied the minimum recognition of being seen as victims at all. All this is effected to some extent by deliberate editorial and political design, and perhaps to an even greater extent simply because that commonplace perception guarantees a greater audience in comparison with more complex and searching analyses, and promotes and guarantees political careers as well.

As it operates in Italy today, this mechanism of fear is the ultimate result of an expressly political simplification. The original agent of this fear and hatred, and the first great simplifying movement in this regard, was the ethnically oriented Northern League. It was the language of this movement that spawned the words and slogans of fear and hatred, initially directed against Italians who were somehow considered “other” for ethnic reasons (whatever ethnicity signifies here: and it probably expresses nothing but a desire to exclude, to ascribe inferior status, to a selected group of individuals, as had happened before with the slogan of “race”). At first, these words and slogans were adopted by the parties of the Right. But subsequently, also as a result of the profound crisis of identity on the part of the Left, they became part of a more widely diffused and increasingly common language. Indeed, these words and slogans have now become the commonplace idiom in which the mechanism of fear operates: a linguistic, mental, psychological, moral, and ideological idiom that brings all, or almost all, of the current political proposals much closer together, including all, or almost all, of the slogans and programmes that concern the issue of civil rights.

The Public and the Citizens

But the politics of security on offer is not really directed toward different interests, or even different individuals. For in the first place, it is fears and hatreds

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8 As always happens when a persecutory collective singles out and hounds its selective victims. See my study Il silenzio dei persecutori, ovvero il coraggio di Shahrazâd, Bologna: il Mulino, 2001, pp. 25 ff.
rather than interests that provide its deep content, so to speak. In the second
place, it is not really citizens, or organised groups of citizens, that are the cho-
sen interlocutors here. As in the “market” proper, the security on offer – that
is, the question of security as such – is directed at the general public. Or rather
– as has been expressly pointed out with reference to an “oligopolist” of the
electoral market – it is directed at the public body of the citizens.9 This extremely
revealing expression betrays an anachronistic combination of an individualistic
aspect (the citizens) and a holistic-collective one (the public). It is not always
appreciated that a very similar disturbing symbiosis of notions was also typical
of the totalitarian ideologies of the last century (Louis Dumont has identified
and analysed this characteristic feature of Hitler’s Weltanschauung).10

And finally, this public – an amorphous and total subject, composed of
“imaginary individuals” incapable of establishing relations with one another11
– is encouraged to consume the security on offer. Or is encouraged to orient its
demand to the product supplied, one that is also the “lowest” and most elemen-
tary, and thus the most marketable. If this is the case, it follows that the com-
peting political agents, or rather, the oligopolists of the political market, must
cultivate and even produce (and sell) such fear and hatred in order to cultivate
and produce the consumption of security, and thus the consensus and votes that
they require. The machinery of fear is oriented to this process, whether it is a
matter of deliberate choices, or is simply the result of expectations of political
advancement. All of this transpires in a language of fear and hatred that has come
to exercise a certain hegemony, and is now almost the only discourse available,
one that is constantly produced and reproduced by the power of the mechanism
which “speaks” this language. And what this mechanism invariably speaks of
are, precisely, crimes and transgressions, real or imagined, and what it invokes
are invariably the categories of the weak and eminently persecutable: migrants,
Islamic “terrorists,” the Roma, the poor and the destitute.

The Hegemony of the Market

This explains, in terms of security, how we can forget that part of our country,
and not only the South, is still dominated by organised crime, or that finan-
cial impropriety and criminality is more dangerous than that of the poor, or

9 See P. Guzzanti, the “Preface” to S. Berlusconi, L’Italia che ho in mente, Milan: Mondadori, 2000,
pp. 14 f.; see also my own contribution, La libertà negli occhi, Bologna: il Mulino, 2006, p. 131.
11 See Escobar, La libertà, pp. 120 ff.
again that precarious conditions of employment are the principal source of insecurity in society. It is evidently much easier, and much more productive, to heap social odium upon “criminals” who are incomparably weaker and more vulnerable. And it is here, in this symbolic or virtual dimension – i.e. one that is artificially nourished and maintained by the devices of the media – that the competition between the political parties and their followers effectively takes place. And at this point, what really counts, what gets the “public body of the citizens” on the march is the most effective slogan, the most primitive security proposal, the most ruthless policy suggestion. If the purpose is to fashion consensus, and thus to conquer ever greater shares of the market, then any adequate means, if it is adequate to this end, is also justified.

This also explains the fairly general silence on the part of political groups, and of almost all the press and television media, with regard to the pogroms which have been unleashed against the Roma people, and the actions which the police have taken against their encampments (including the established ones, which are also inhabited by Italian citizens). And finally it explains the silence with regard to government measures directed against the migrants, the prostitutes, the poor, the weak in general (from whose presence the cities must be cleansed, if necessary with the assistance of the military). And of course, in this way, civil rights are put at risk: in the short term the civil rights of the victims, in the medium and longer term the civil rights of the “public body of the citizens.” And this is what always happens when politics entrusts itself to fear and hatred, when the market becomes the sole value and the sole model of social life.

All of this transpires in the best of all possible (political) worlds, one that is set on the march by the agents of fear and their “marketing” of security. And who could ever contest and overcome this “cultural” hegemony? The wretched representatives of Pangloss who have entertained themselves for so long with their “metaphysico-theologico-cosmolonigological” exercises? For all their sophistication, they should at least attempt to develop a perspective, to construct a language, that would not simply be parasitic upon those which has prevailed until now. To start with, assuming they were ready to accept advice, one might at least suggest that they stop contemplating the world (and the political realm) through the spectacles of the faithful philosopher of Baron Thunder-ten-tronckh.

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