The Social Ontology of Fear and Neoliberalism

Fear is a primal instinct; it is a survival mechanism the evolution of which allowed the early humans, indeed all species to adapt, evolve, and survive. When humans moved into settled communities with more advanced means of production, the nature of fear – much like the nature of social relationships – changed. Once the means of social reproduction were secured, fear became less necessary as a survival instinct and more useful as a heuristic device. Fear evolved.

Fear cannot be characterized solely as a socially constructed phenomenon, nor as the instinctual response to personally felt traumas. The growth and nature of fear must be studied as a process that develops under its own inertia, feeding off its antecedent past, and as a phenomenon that is shaped by and in turn shapes its institutional setting. Fear should be understood as both structurally determined and socially transformative. This research seeks to examine the ontology of fear, specifically as it relates to neoliberalism.

"There is no terror in the bang, only in the anticipation of it" (Alfred Hitchcock).

"People react to fear, not love. They don't teach that in Sunday school, but it's true"
(Richard Nixon).

Fear is a primal instinct; it is a survival mechanism the evolution of which allowed the early humans, indeed all species to adapt, evolve, and survive. When humans moved into settled communities with more advanced means of production, the nature of fear – much like the nature of social relationships – changed. Once the means of social reproduction were secured, fear became less necessary as a survival instinct and more useful as a heuristic device. Fear evolved from solely the instinctually driven 'flight or fight' response to include a more nuanced and generalized state of anxiety that reproduces the social structure and teaches the individual the importance of adherence to social norms.

Fear cannot be characterized solely as a socially constructed phenomenon, nor as the instinctual response to personally felt traumas. The growth and nature of fear must be studied as a process that develops under its own inertia, feeding off its antecedent and instinctual past, as well as a phenomenon that is shaped by and in turn shapes its institutional setting. Fear should be understood as both structurally determined and socially transformative. This research seeks to examine the ontology of fear, specifically as it relates to neoliberalism. If fear is a universal experience for humans, an experience which cuts across class division and geo-political boundaries, then we must ask if the nature of fear is the same for all as well.

1. The Nature of Fear

Historically, waves of popular fear emerged as a product of the times in which they were situated, such as in the late nineteenth century panic of being buried alive or the mid-twentieth century fear of nuclear destruction and fall-out fueled by the Cold War (Bourke 2005). The nature of fear evolves as society evolves. When fears of self-sustenance had

been addressed, fears of social status and relative well-being emerged in its place (Bourke 2003).

Instead of examining fear and anxiety[1] solely as something produced by our times, it is also important to understand how fear creates or perpetuates our institutions (Bourke 2005). If individual action and institutional evolution are truly interactive, then that should include the entire range of the human experience, including emotions. Anxieties should not be thought of solely as a highly individual experience, but rather more accurately as the shared experience of individuals living within the same socio-cultural-historical context. Anxiety is embedded in the institutions that surround the individual and is routinized in her daily life (Jackson and Everts 2010).

In order for the individual to exercise agency, she must be self-reflexive, and part of reflexive thought is the experience of fear. In the same way that agency is interactively constructed by the individual and her institutional context, so is fear. Not only is there an instinctual element to fear - as demonstrated in the physiological response of the body - there is also a dimension to fear that is shaped by the interactivity between structure and agent (Bourke, 2003). The greater the agency the individual feels the more anxious she potentially feels in return: "The agency shifts. Humans can control their own destiny, which in the hands of the responsible is wonderfully empowering. In the hands of the paranoid, that power is terrifying" (Bourke 2005: 370). It is important to recognize that there is a difference between individual and social anxieties, that is, there is a difference between the anxieties that an individual may singularly possess that are kept private, and the anxieties individuals

---

[1] There are many arguments surrounding the delineation between fear and anxiety. Instead of becoming entangled between what are certainly important differences, this research will focus on the causes of and responses to both fear and anxiety within the specific historical context of neoliberalism. The categories themselves are less important than the interaction of both emotional states to the historically unique stage of capitalism - neoliberalism.

share across a particular community. The latter shared social anxieties become part of the social structure and the social repository of knowledge (Jackson and Everts 2010)

1.1 Fear and institutions

The non-instinctual part of fear is both socially constructed and acts on the social structure - it is an interactive negotiation that gives fear its form and imbues it with meaning (Bourke 2003). Fear and structure are thus interactive, both evolving independently and interactively (Bourke 2005). The more community specific and the more superficial the social anxiety, the less likely the anxiety producing event is to provoke institutional change. The reverse is also true: the more wide-spread and temporally resistant the social anxiety, the more likely institutional change – for instance, health protocols or waste infrastructure – will take place (Jackson and Everts 2010).

Fear is given expression and articulation through social and cultural practice. If the role of culture is to provide a coherent and consistent world view, then when that world view is threatened, all the security previously afforded by that cultural worldview is threatened, thus heightening anxieties (McBride 2011).When the object of an anxiety-inducing event is easy to locate, its elimination often results in the elimination of the anxiety (ex: avian flu). When the object of the anxiety-inducing event cannot be easily located or eliminated (ex: terrorist threats), individuals must cope with constant anxiety. When extended to the level of institutions, it is clear that persistent social anxieties are not relegated to the experience of the individual, but rather formal and informal institutions as well. Importantly, redress from anxieties, whether or not their sources are easily located, falls to those institutions. In contending with those social anxieties, institutions adapt and evolve as part of the coping process and it makes the interactivity between institutions and fear clear (Jackson and Everts 2010). For example, in response to terrorist threats from Islamic fundamentalists, the US government put stricter regulations in boarding planes into place. Likewise, some churches

responded to the anxiety by burning copies of the Qur'an, while other churches initiated inter-faith dialogues to educate and alleviate anxieties with respect to Islam as a whole.

As science and technology are agents of change, the progression of science and technology represent sources of anxieties. Framed in this way, we can extend the Veblenian dichotomy beyond the institutional-ceremonial drag on progress and dig deeper into analyzing the anxieties provoked by institutional change. In addition to the nature of the anxiety, the manner in which communities react to social anxieties determines the course of social action. While some may catalyze technological change, pushing it forward even faster, other social anxieties may spark a reactionary response, with communities drawing on tradition and perhaps slowing the pace of social and technological change (Jackson and Everts 2010).

1.2 Ontological insecurity and existential anxiety

At the core of modern fear lie two essential and related causes: ontological insecurity and existential anxiety. Ontological insecurity is related to the individual's need for social continuity and the ability to materially and socially reproduce her standard of living. Existential anxiety hinges on the individual's ability to cope with the finiteness of living. In everyday life, the individual finds significance through tasks and relations with others as well as through the potential to advance either socially or in the contribution toward some social goal. When the individual discovers the authentic nature of being is one that ends in death, all potential and more generally, significance is lost. When the individual experiences existential anxiety, it is as the result of the breakdown in social relationships that heretofore distracted or covered up for the individual the constant possibility of death, of nothingness (Stolorow 2007). Anxiety also emerges as a result of the incompleteness of truth; that universal truths have always escaped humans contributes to human anxiety. It is not

therefore necessarily the finiteness of man's life that is as troubling as the limitations to his knowledge, including knowledge of what happens after death (Barrett 1958).

The less ontologically secure must work much harder to push existential anxiety into latency. Death might be the great equalizer, but when we face it and under what circumstances, is most decidedly not. This is especially true on a very basic level in areas where health care is not considered a human right, or where health care is not adequately funded and accessible to all. Accessibility to healthcare is part of our everyday ontological security, so while all of us must eventually face death, some of us are more ontologically secured than others. To this end, ontological security helps to forestall the pervasiveness in the foreground of thought of existential anxiety and as such, those who are more ontologically secure, that is, more successful within the neoliberal project, are better equipped to push into the background or to cover up the constant threat of nothingness or death and therefore are able to ameliorate existential anxiety.

According to Heidegger (as well as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche), it is the individual's inability to come to grips with her existential anxiety (angst) that contributes to the acceptance of and adherence to social norms (Jackson and Everts 2010). The anxiety of death, of the nothingness-of-being is forestalled, ameliorated, or covered up by the participation of the individual with a social group: "…'they' provides a constant tranquillization about death" (Heidegger in Stolorow 2007: 377). Death is no longer a constant threat, but is transformed into some ambiguous future event. Involvement with a social group is therefore a coping mechanism against the ever-present threat of death (Stolorow 2007). The greater the existential anxiety, the deeper the allegiance to identity groups and ideologically driven beliefs runs (McBride 2011).

2. The Devil You Know

2.1 Nativist reaction

Individuals are largely, albeit tacitly driven by their personal psychological needs in the process of decision making. In the face of either ontological insecurity or existential anxiety, individuals are more likely to cling to the status quo, that is, to espouse conservative values in the face of change, even when it is counter to what outsiders view as the individual's long term best interest (Jost 2006). During periods of heightened uncertainty and anxiety, individuals gravitate toward philosophically conservative, right-wing[2] ideals which provide concrete answers to unanswerable questions and which also provide boundaries for order, structure, and hierarchy that relieve the individual from having to process too much information and make too many decisions in an uncertain environment (Jost and Hunyady 2005). Ideologies and belief systems are the outcome of individuals wrestling with existential concerns; the sharper the existential concerns, as occurs in times of acute crisis, the more individuals seek existential reassurance from their constructed belief systems. As such, conservative ideologies anchored in tradition and the past, become more attractive in times of heightened existential crisis. It is when uncertainty pervades and further crisis looms that traditional/conservative ideologies find stronger adherents as well as new recruits (Salzman 2008).

The anxieties of the individual may remain latent, especially in times of relative security and prosperity, but the anxieties are nevertheless there, lurking beneath the surface. So too then is the possibility of a renewed commitment and allegiance to institutions that offer conservative ideals ever present, ready to rise in the face of uncertainty. Historically, events that are traumatic at the national level tend to heighten the appeal of not just

---

[2] Extensive psychological research by Jost found that "system threat" and "fear of death" were the two strongest evokers of conservativism (2006, 662-3).

conservative leaders, but also of conservative values writ large. Hitler's rise from the cauldron of the Great Depression was less the outcome of charismatic trickery, and more the result of the sharp ontological and existential crises faced by the people in the throes of the worst crisis of capitalism to date (Jost 2006). As Hayek pointed out, in times of heightened uncertainty or threat, individuals become more willing to accept leadership that proposes strict rules and deep social sanctions for violation of those rules (1944).

As individuals become disembedded from their old social structures, insecurity compels them to create social moorings and continuity through a re-imagination of those social structures to which they plead greater allegiance and fidelity than they otherwise would have done absent the systemic changes. As the individual becomes de-contextualized via change both political and economic, she can become more attached to an imagined past, and in so doing, become more deeply rooted in that imagined tradition and less tolerant of deviations from it (Kinnvall 2004). The dismantling of tradition and the uprooting of social ties provokes nativist reactions manifest in religious fundamentalism as well as in a resurgence of right-wing, neo-fascist organizations, which in turn produce well-defined "others." These reactions promise social continuity and security by giving meaning, purpose, and self-esteem to the individual (Salzman 2008).

2.2 System justification theory

Within the field of social psychology, the theory of system justification attempts to uncover why individuals defend the status quo of a system, even when the status quo does not act in the individual's best interest. One of the most powerful explanations uncovered through empirical research on the matter is that of "situational antecedents" (Jost and Hunyady 2005: 260). An individual's personal set of ideologies endows her/him with a set of mental models which enables the individual to legitimize the institutional context in which s/he sits (Jost et al. 2003). Further legitimization appears inevitable when the interactivity

between individuals and institutions is taken into consideration and that ideologies and institutions are not formed in a vacuum but rather are partially co-constructive (not to discount internal evolution).

System justification theory is not context dependent, but rather relies on the psychological processes individuals employ to cope with uncertainty and anxiety. For instance, researchers found that individuals from Western capitalist countries and individuals from Eastern Bloc, formerly command planned economies both engaged in system justification despite the different systems they were respectively defending. It seems to be a human compulsion to defend the present system when faced with uncertainty and anxiety regardless of what that current system might be. It is truly a case of 'the devil you know' (Jost and Hunyady 2005).

That the individual seeks reassurance of order in the face of loss of personal control is what lends itself to system justification. System justification entails much more than distinguishing the in-group from the "other;" system justification means that individuals support and advocate for the continuance of a system regardless of its empirical efficacy and oppose any social change. This dogmatic support of a system is more the result of a feeling of a loss of personal control rather than a response to existential anxiety which is more likely to provoke allegiance to a world view by way of invidious distinction from the other/s (Rutjens and Loseman 2010).

As part of the system justification process, individuals begin to legitimize their surrounding institutional context by rationalizing the status quo. The ideologies that individuals use in order to rationalize the system include: "...the Protestant work ethic, meritocratic ideology, fair market ideology, economic system justification, belief in a just world…" to name but a few (Jost and Hunyady 2005: 260-1).[3] Experiments also show that

---

[3] See Jost and Hunyady 2005 for a table that includes the ideology and descriptive content, p. 261.

individuals are more willing to engage in the stereotyping of others in the justification of a system that sustains inequality as a means of justifying the hierarchy (Jost and Hunyady 2005).

Many individuals who engage in system justification when it clearly is not in their own best interest to do so, such as with disadvantaged groups, suffer from depression which has been correlated to that rejection of alternative (different from their own) systems. Additionally, and regardless of the circumstances, these same disadvantaged groups continually perceived the more advantaged in a favorable light - even when a sub-section of the advantaged might be blamed for the current anxiety and uncertainty of the disadvantaged, such as with the case of questionable business practices in the corporate and banking sector (Jost and Hunyady 2005).

Since individuals who justify the market system are unrealistically optimistic about their own future and believe they have control over market outcomes, when failure does strike, the blow stirs more anxiety than might otherwise emerge. The heightened levels of anxiety that result from the unexpected losses lead individuals not to blame the system, but to place blame elsewhere, such as on other individuals who likewise have failed (Jost et al. 2003). That with which we find fault in others spotlights what we do not like about ourselves. Since that fear or hatred of others is at least partially rooted in self-loathing, it becomes all the more attractive to be able to identify an 'other' on whom we may unload those undesired characteristics and focus our outrage (Bourke 2005).

3. Demons

3.1 Moral panics

Any given society during any given historical time faces a number of possible dangers; which dangers are selected from the lottery for close scrutiny and alarm is a function of the moral position of the society - what that society finds morally reprehensible or morally laudable. A danger that allows for a specific group or social institution to be targeted as its source imbues the danger with form and articulation (Glassner 2009). Moral panics demonstrate in rather dramatic fashion, society's limits to the tolerance of non-conformist behavior (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994).

Within the literature on moral panics, much attention has been paid to the socio-economic conditions within which the panic catalyzed. Studies found that in all historical cases researched, some systemic unrest existed that was difficult to articulate. This is not to suggest a conspiratorial element, that moral panics are created whole-cloth in order to distract the public and keep them occupied with some specific demon not central to the functioning of the status quo. Rather, it is to suggest that during periods of generalized, difficult to articulate and tacit discomfort the public will seize the opportunity to name an evil and challenge it (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994).

Moral panics are also more likely to emerge during periods of concentrated technological and social change, when the norms of a society soften and material progress inspires changes to tradition or custom. The less rigid and clear the social mores and norms, the more fertile society is for the emergence of a moral panic (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). The ability to blame another group enables the individual to transfer an unnamed and tacit anxiety into a known and objectified fear. The individual is able to not only find an external locus of blame, but is at the same time, asserting the 'sacredness' of themselves and their

choices (Kinnvall 2004). Scapegoating thus assists the individual in constructing an external locus of blame - that of the demonized other (Bourke 2005).

Moral panics thus serve a dual purpose: one, it makes the threat easily identifiable and labeled; and two, greater panic means greater acceptance by the public of whatever measures might be used to annihilate that threat. Attention is redirected from the cause of the threat to support for whatever action might quell it (Bourke 2005). A moral panic is punctuated fear which demands an immediate remedy (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994).

Moral panics, although relatively recently named, have a storied history. The contextualization of social phenomenon demonstrates that specific social conditions engender specific social responses, so it is true of neoliberalism, that specific moral panics repeatedly emerge, none so obvious in its classism as that of the panic of the wanton welfare queen (Cohen 2002). Fear not only distracts individuals from issues associated with income inequality but when it pays attention to class, it does so by painting the poor as part of the problem. The effect is two-fold: the poor are demonized, and those who might be positioned in the lower income brackets assure themselves that their relative income position is higher than those other poor demons (Glassner 2009). If the exception can be promoted to perception of rule, then the moral panic has seized. The outrage over the amoral and corrupt attempts of unwed mothers to cheat the system promoted the case for individual responsibility in general while rallying support for the shrinking of the welfare state specifically (Cohen 2002).

3.2 Religion and terror

While moral panics burn brightly but briefly, the slow flame of fundamentalist religious beliefs smolders and burns continuously. With each there is an evil that is easy to name and blame, but with fundamentalism comes the entrenchment of tradition and religious clarity that enemies remain enemies with no redemption but through conversion. The

consistency of belief provides relief against personal crises of ontological insecurity and existential anxiety.

The subject matter of terror management theory (TMT) is existential anxiety and the manner in which individuals cope with it (Friedman and Rholes 2008). Researchers in the area of TMT have found an empirical positive correlation between existential anxiety and culture: ". . . people defend their ideologies when reminded of their mortality (McBride 2011). An individual's "morality salience" heightens the individual's reliance on mental constructs that offer salves to the fear of death; existential anxiety and supernatural beliefs are thus positively correlated in individuals with pre-existing religious belief constructs. As a corollary, when those religious belief structures are threatened or undermined, the individual's existential anxiety increases accordingly (Friedman and Rholes 2008).

Even the most heavily ideologically-laden acts of terrorism are motivated at their core by existential anxiety. That individuals are conscious of their own mortality and even more importantly, their inability to predict, control, or prevent the finality of death stirs deep anxiety that pushes individuals to find solace or meaning with other like-minded individuals with whom they share the same eventual fate. In other words, the continuity of culture is partly a by-product of the individual's need for meaning in the face of otherwise emotionally crippling existential anxiety. All individuals must grapple with existential anxiety - it is a struggle that transcends culture and history. The response to that struggle, however, is culturally driven and defined (McBride 2011).

Individuals employ many mechanisms in efforts to cope with existential anxiety: religious devotion, family and friends, social groups, and social causes. The most efficient cultural construct in the amelioration of existential anxiety is that of religion, which assuages

fear of death by offering specific answers to what happens after death[4]. The stricter a religion and the more detailed its portrayal of life after death, the more that religious conviction appears to assuage existential anxiety (Friedman and Rholes 2008). Once adopted, allegiances become very difficult to disentangle from an individual's identity if that identity is ideologically based. Ideological thinking that maintains internal logical consistency (ex: through God's ubiquitous and universal laws) and promises future realization (life after death) becomes very difficult to dismantle with logical reasoning (McBride 2011). Those individuals who seek meaning and social continuity by joining terrorist groups find that the acts of violence ultimately only amplify the loss of meaning and disruption of social continuity, instead of ameliorating it. As a result, individuals become even more attached to the ideology and more entrenched in the terrorist activities (McBride 2011).

Depravation motivates aggression, and those who have been either materially, emotionally, or creativity-deprived, strike aggressively. The isolated individual who is denied the right to experience control over her access to the material and the emotionally satisfying, lashes out in acts of physical aggression, that taken to the extreme results in terrible acts of violence and destruction. The self-actualization routinely denied by neoliberalism either through the ontological insecurity of denial to access of the means of physical reproduction or through the existential breakdown of the financial failure-to-be, manifests into physical attacks on the tangible representatives of Western neoliberalism, such as the World Trade Towers. Taken to the absolute limit, we find Dr. Strangelove's emotional release only through the literal destruction of the Earth (Becker 1971).

---

[4] Secular worldviews include a variety of possibilities including identification with a particular nation, sports group, or collegiate tradition (Friedman and Rholes 39).

4. Fear and Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism, as understood from the perspective of Western market economies, embodies the ideological shift in the purpose of the state from one that has a responsibility to insure full employment and protect its citizens against the exigencies of the market to one that has a responsibility to insure protection of the market itself (Harvey, 2005). The neoliberal narrative consists of a central ideological construct – that of hyper-individualism – upon which the justification of neoliberalism rests, the consequences of which legitimize and prioritize market activities above socially integrative activities. "Neoliberalism thoroughly revises what it means to be a human person;" (Mirowski 2013: 58) neoliberalism teaches through the socialization process that each individual should be accountable to herself and in so doing, each individual's responsibility to others and to the collective is eroded. Society is then comprised entirely and solely of self-interested, atomistic individuals seeking to forward their own agendas. The emphasis on individual accountability and responsibility naturally segues into the power of the individual acting alone.

The hyper-individualism of neoliberalism encourages an increasingly fragmented notion of the self, one that is disconnected from any community, consisting less of a coherent whole and more of an amalgamation of superficial, commodified identities. This ad hoc, material construction of the self, mirrors the relentless accumulation imperative of capitalism in that it can never be satiated, and the self is therefore perpetually incomplete and ill-defined. As Mirowski suggests, "(neoliberalism) replaces the time-honored ambition to 'know yourself' with the exhortation to 'express yourself' . . ." (2013: 92). The focus on exoteric measures of worth rather than internal self-actualization stirs within the individual invidious comparisons against other individuals and dogged fears of inadequacy.

As material progress has amplified, so too has the complexity of capitalism, especially with respect to its modern incarnation of neoliberalism. With greater complexity comes less

transparency and individuals slip further out of touch with the totality. This disrupted

orientation has grown as capitalism has evolved. As well, mystification deepens as

capitalism evolves: what was not known in the material production of objects in the early

stages of capitalism has grown into a complete disconnection with the way in which ever

more abstract markets for intangible assets operate in neoliberalism. One cannot help but feel

deeply anxious about residing in a totality s/he doesn't understand or cannot even envision on

a practical level (Tally 2010).

4.1 Alienation

Alienation, while not new to the human condition, becomes heightened in the

industrial and post-industrial world (McBride 2011). More specifically, neoliberalism

heightens the feeling of isolation and individualism such that it sharpens existential anxiety.

A vicious cycle presents itself: those who are more alienated within the system of

neoliberalism likewise experience diminished ontological security; those individuals who are

less ontologically secure are less equipped to cope with existential anxiety, and less able to

push that anxiety into latency. Therefore, those individuals, twice alienated – once through

the neoliberal project, and again through the experience of existential anxiety – must find

more dramatic and all-encompassing means of connection with others in order to push

against that alienation. This perhaps explains why some individuals forge deep allegiance

with extra-economic, (perhaps extra-) social groups, as they must compensate for the

amplification of alienation.

As social relationships disintegrate under the pressure of market intensification and

the individual is forced to act more on her own behalf, relying less of social institutions and

familial networks, anxiety reawakens. With the global spread of neoliberalism, traditional

and cultural values become undermined or eroded by market values. The result is an increase

in existential anxiety, which serves to escalate allegiances to outside identity groups

(McBride 2011). If, as Becker proposes, financial success is the "new universal immortality ideology," (in Salzman 2008: 320) then it stands to reason that individuals who are less financially successful will seek amelioration of their existential anxieties through other cultural constructs that promise some sort of immortality whether it is through religion or historical memory. The attraction of religion, as previously explained, is that it offers universal certainties; individuals who follow the rules are guaranteed success within that religion, whether it is immediate acceptance into the fold or the delayed promise of eternal salvation. Religion also offers restricted choice sets, which individuals experiencing heightened uncertainty appreciate, as a limited (or no) choice set removes the possibility of making a wrong choice (Kinnvall 2004). Clear cut rules on a checklist for success (salvation of any sundry variety) provides much greater certainty than the neoliberal project which holds the promise of the 'american dream' and the myth of self-madeness, but without a definitive how-to and without a guarantee of success.

Despite the tendency within capitalism of increasing market segmentation, neoliberalism tends to refocus individuals onto material concerns and reshapes priorities to align with the primacy of the functioning of the disembedded economy while exalting the status of the individual. As the reorganization of society to support the neoliberal stage of capitalism threatens the continuity of tradition structures within communities, so too is the self-esteem that individuals construct from belonging to those tradition structures (Salzman 2008).

4.2 Power relations

As individuals attempt to reconcile their own perceptions with the surrounding social structure, emotions such as fear play a critical part in informing the individual of her place and role. As such, fear is a reflection of the power relationships within a society. The network of power relations within the neoliberal social structure of accumulation, which

dominates the other spheres of living, therefore plays a powerful role in how any given individual experiences fear; those less powerfully positioned experience more intense degrees of fear. This is not to say that fear can be mapped directly on to class; the experience of emotions cannot be used as a sorting mechanism for class (Bourke 2005). Rather, fear is enactive knowledge in that it informs the interaction between the individual agent and her surrounding social structure; it is enactive knowledge that tacitly communicates power relations (Bourke 2003).

Indeed, power relations often define the fear that an individual experiences. For instance, during the 1940s, children from upper and middle class families could be medically diagnosed as having a fear of school and as such received treatment and educational accommodation for their condition. Working class or poor children who did not attend school regardless of reason were considered truant, and they and their parents lawfully prosecuted. The emotional experience attached to school was thus defined institutionally and varied according to economic status (Bourke 2005). The reaction to social anxieties is context specific and dependent upon other background anxieties already at work, as well as the power structures in place. For example, with the threat of the "swine flu" pandemic, Egypt responded by wiping out the swine stock owned by a religious minority in the area, Asian countries placed an embargo on pork products from North America, and in the US, the lobbying arm of the pork industry campaigned vociferously through the media and through Congress to message to the public that pork was still safe. Here we see three different reactions to the same social anxiety, each of which is the result of the present anxiety context and local institutionalized power structure (Jackson and Everts 2010).

In the US, with help from the media, the public is taught how and what to fear: road rage, adolescent mothers, drugs, internet predators. The stories are hyperbolized and the causes not explored. Following any media scare, an in-depth journalistic analysis is offered

to explore the root causes of the tragic event. The root causes often focus on the individual/s responsible for the event, rather than looking at larger systemic or structural issues that might have provoked it. For instance, following reports of the phenomenon of "road rage" were in-depth looks at possible neurological conditions that might have spawned the rage, but no real analysis on the impact of urban sprawl, increased commute times, or the escalation of the housing prices, forcing individuals to move farther from city centers (Glassner 2009). Focusing on the individual rather than structural causes of any incident reinforces the neoliberal narrative of individual responsibility.

4.3 Neoliberal policies

While economists might (over)state that the market system is efficient, there is not general, professional agreement about the inherent fairness of the market. The average individual, however, interprets efficiency as fairness and thus is convinced of the ultimate fairness of the market economy – individuals mistake choice in the market place for control over market place outcomes. Moreover, since the market's efficiency is interpreted by the average individual as fairness, and one of the maxims of the market is that of the individual pursuing her/his own interest, the 'virtue' of selfishness is itself justified. The longevity of the market system - bolstered throughout its life by government intervention - creates an institutional path dependence that further legitimizes its continued existence (Jost et al. 2003). The equating of market efficiency and market fairness is stretched further by the ethos of neoliberalism which claims that freer markets operate even more efficiently and emphasizes the trope of hyper-individualism.

The idea that individuals control their own respective fates in the neoliberal market place coupled with their unrealistic optimism regarding their own future prosperity assists individuals in coping with the uncertainty and anxiety created by the market system in the first place. As well, individuals tend not to support policies which would redistribute wealth

because of overly optimistic beliefs of their own individual prosperity - a mental model that prevails especially among the less educated (Jost et al. 2003). The perpetual state of crisis avoidance within the neoliberal project breeds insecurity and uncertainty. Moreover, while individuals operate under the perception of complete autonomy and efficacy, the veiled locus of power resides in the deep political reach of the corporate sector.

The impact of institutions on fear is evident by examining the evolution of fear: the fear that inspired manic bank runs in the early part of the twentieth century has been systematically addressed by the government invention of the FDIC (Bourke 2005). Fear also drives crucial allocation decisions in public spending. With the rise of neoliberalism, more funds are channeled into research and programs that assist statistically fewer individuals (Glassner 2009). Neoconservatives (inaptly named) fan the flame of distrust and when possible moral panics about perceived threats from welfare recipients or terrorists in order to obfuscate the failures of the neoliberal state while simultaneously bolstering the neoliberal policies of retrenchment of the welfare state and the strengthening of national defense (Lipsitz 1998).

Globalization represents the spread of the neoliberal ideology which began in the late 1970s in the Western world, and spread via transnational corporate encroachment and aid packages delivered to developing countries tied with contingencies that attempted to establish stability, but instead created instability through the introduction of massive institutional changes requisite to support the neoliberal ideology and agenda (Kinnvall 2004). The impact of neoliberalism is felt on two fronts: one, in that the continuity of social relationships erodes; two that the indigenous traditions and customs are steamrolled by the values of the marketplace, and previous ethnographic markers of success are replaced by pecuniary measures (Salzman 2008). Capitalism, in all its forms, but especially in neoliberalism, requires democracy to sustain it. So with the spread of markets came the spread of

democracy, undermining former social institutions and traditions, and fueling insecurity and amplifying the isolation already wrought by capitalist structures. Globalization threatens continuity of life on the local level; it invites ontological insecurity as individuals can no longer be certain of work and their places in society to which they've become accustomed. Democracy - thought in the Western world to be the great liberator - threatens tradition and social custom at a local level. In seeking continuity and security, individuals will reach toward collective identity groups which offer simple rhetoric framed in familiar terms. As the welfare state shrank in both the Western world and in developing countries, identity groups grew to fill the void and to offer continuity and security (Kinnvall 2004).

5. Concluding Remarks

Individuals cling to the idea that they live in an ordered world that will reward the just and punish the deserving because to live in a world where chaos reigns and the individual bears no control over her fate creates a level of anxiety that is too difficult for the individual to negotiate on her own. This is part of the reason that individuals tend to see the world as just and karmic even when their own individual experiences might indicate otherwise. The corollary to the belief that the world is a fair and just place is the idea that those who are in some way disadvantaged or have failed within the market system deserved to do so – it is the fault of the poor that they are poor, and further, it is the fault of the poor that they remain that way. The rich, likewise, deserve what they have, regardless of how their wealth might have been acquired (Jost et al. 2003). Accordingly, neoliberalism with its hyper-individualism becomes painted as meritocratic.

As research in social psychology demonstrates, even if the public were convinced that neoliberalism is not what its rhetoric avails, individuals would still be reticent to change their habits of thought, and would likely become even more emotionally attached to the empty consumerist culture and individual rigor that characterizes neoliberalism. Moreover, within

neoliberalism, fear is profitable for politicians, the media, the medical community, and even religion; the very institutions to which individuals turn for information and protection from fear are the very ones who profit from our continual fear (Bourke 2005). Fear, which prompts this nativist reaction and neoliberalism which promotes ontological insecurity and reinforces fear, thus sustain each other.

The point is not to eradicate fear, or to even attempt to do so. Indeed we often pay to be afraid, whether it is a horror movie or a rollercoaster. Fear inspires and humanizes us; it ignites the imagination for better or worse and can be exhilarating (Bourke 2005). The point is that we should not be afraid to engage honestly and introspectively with our fear so that we don't simply retreat to the comfort of known horrors or sublimate our fears onto others who have no way of assuaging the authentic source of our fear. If we address the systemic issues that create those situations which fuel fear instead of narrowing our scope of examination to the experience of the individual, then as a society we have the potential to treat the causes instead of the symptoms of fear. While there appear to be few limits on the imagining of the potential of technology and material progress, humans are much more limited in the imagining of social futures; the current status quo limits the imagining of the potential (Tally 2010). If the inability of the individual to imagine the totality results in alienation and anxiety, then in imagining a future without anxiety, the individual would become dis-alienated from society. It is the role of the social economist to help the individual in that imagining.

Reference List

Barrett, W. (1958) *Irrational Man: a Study in Existential Philosophy*, London: Heinemann.

Becker, E. (1971) *The Birth and Death of Meaning: an Interdisciplinary Perspective on the Problem of Man*, New York: The Free Press.

Bourke, J. (2003) "Fear and Anxiety: Writing about Emotion in Modern History," *History Workshop Journal* 55: 111-33.

Bourke, J. (2005) *Fear: a Cultural History*, London: Virago Press.

Cohen, S. (2002) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: the Creation of the Mods and Rockers* 3rd ed., Oxford: Martin Robertson.

Friedman, M. and Rholes, W.S. (2008) "Religious Fundamentalism and Terror Management," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 18(1): 36–52.

Glassner B. (2009) *Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things*, New York: Basic Books.

Goode E. and Ben-Yehuda, N. (1994) *Moral Panics: the Social Construction of Deviance*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Hayek, F. (1994) *The Road to Serfdom*, Chicago: University of Chicago.

Hitchcock, A. quoted in Halliwell, Leslie (ed., 1984) *Halliwell's Filmgoer's Companion*, HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.

Jackson, P. and Everts, J. (2010) "Anxiety as Social Practice," *Environment and Planning A* 42(11): 2791–2806.

Jost, J., Blount, S., Pfeffer, J. and Hunyadi, G. (2003) "Fair Market Ideology: Its Cognitive-Motivational Underpinnings," *Research in Organizational Behavior* 25(3): 53–91.

Jost, J. (2006) "The End of the End of Ideology," *The American Psychologist* 61(7): 651–70.

Jost, J. and Hunyady, O. (2005) "Antecedents and Consequences System-Justifying Ideologies," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 14, 5: 260–265.

Kinnvall, C. (2004) "Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security," *Political Psychology* 25(5): 741–768.

Lipsitz G. (1998) *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Marcuse, H. (2005) *Heideggerian Marxism,* R. Wolin & J. Abromeit, eds., Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

McBride, M.K. (2011) "The Logic of Terrorism: Existential Anxiety, the Search for Meaning, and Terrorist Ideologies," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23(4): 560–581.

Mirowski, P. (2013) *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste* London: Verso

Nixon, Richard M. quoted in Saffire, W. (2005) *Before the Fall: An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House* New Jersey: Transaction Publishers: 8.

Rutjens, B.T. and Loseman, A. (2010) "The Society-Supporting Self: System Justification and Cultural Worldview Defense as Different Forms of Self-Regulation," *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* 13(2): 241–250.

Salzman, M.B. (2008) "Globalization, Religious Fundamentalism and the Need for Meaning," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 32(4): 318–327.

Stolorow, R.D. (2007) "Anxiety, Authenticity, and Trauma: The Relevance of Heidegger's Existential Analytic for Psychoanalysis," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 24(2): 373–383.

Tally Jr, R. (2010) "Sartre, Marcuse, and the Utopian Project Today," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*.