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Fear and Others

Fear is an immeasurable aspect of the human condition. When students peruse through history books and stumble upon times of great upheaval and stress they can find it difficult to identify with past societies and concerns. They look back with 20/20 vision, convinced it all could've been avoided, but they forget about fear and how it infects and shapes humanity's course from hunter-gatherer societies to the most technologically advanced civilizations the world has ever known.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, a century known as the American Century, people loved radiation. They believed radium was the herald of a new golden age, The Atomic Age, where human suffering would be eliminated by the inexorable march of technology. Radium was all the rage: companies painted watch faces with radium, it was injected into toothpaste to give it a futuristic glow. In the beginning, radium was viewed as a harbinger of a bright and plentiful future, but future decades would see it shift from fascination to dread.

During this time —the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th— imperialist nations began to decline and a fundamental shift from spiritualism towards materialism crumbled the bedrock of bourgeoise life. The middle and working classes jockeyed for their share of modernity. Theories of existence and order were examined and critiqued, creating a nebulous group of revolutionaries and political thinkers. Trade, the wide availability of printing presses, and the interconnectedness of telegrams created a much smaller world than it had previously been. These advancements didn't create a single worldwide viewpoint, instead fractious and differing beliefs about fundamental concepts of anarchism, populism, and socialism proliferated.

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Zealots and megalomaniacs arose from these masses—revolutionaries of the Right and Left—Leon Czolgosz assassinated William McKinley in the name of anarchism in 1901; Father Coughlin broadcasted fascist and antisemitic theories to millions; and Huey Long promised the redistribution of wealth. In America, a rat's nest of thoughts piqued at an ingrained fear of a foreign other.

The First World War redrew the world, erasing empires who'd stood for centuries. The Bolsheviks, a revolutionary regime, installed themselves in Russia, historically one of the most authoritarian countries in the world, reshaping Leftist thought and casting revolution in Soviet orthodoxy. No longer was the Left viewed as a diverse ideological sphere, it morphed into Soviet satellites intent on the destruction of American democracy.

Fear of the other bubbled. This fear manifested itself twofold—a fear of the other and a fear of an infectious ideology—creating a paranoid, caustic environment where enemies are everywhere and nowhere.

Nazism and Fascism, though appealing to some, has, historically, never held as much sway over the American people. Communism, however, with its views towards gender equality, racial equality, and class equality was by far more appealing to a wider demographic. Thus, it gained a special place in the canon of American bogeymen.

This fear infected the establishment, causing the first Red Scare. J. Edgar Hoover told President Roosevelt that "If the communists got control of just three unions that they would have the power to paralyze the country." These unions were the Longshoremen's Union, The Mine Workers Union, and the Newspaper Guild. They represented the foundation of American

momentum, without them the country wouldn't have prospered or risen to its place in world affairs today. Hoover saw communists in all of them.

In 1919, during the first Red Scare, A. Mitchell Palmer, intent on stopping a government takeover, raided a number of "suspected terrorists", deporting Russian immigrants. He boasted that he returned the "Soviet Ark" to its origins. For a time, the fear of communism ebbed. It became overlooked in the popular imagination, once virulent enemies were viewed either as a lowborn rabble or separated by oceans and continents.

WWII saw a dramatic shift in the official viewpoint of the American people. Stalin was no longer a tyrannical despot, but Uncle Joe. The Russians were our friends. Pictures of American GIs and Russian soldiers shaking hands were published. The official line became one of conciliation and an everlasting friendship, however, within the hallways of government and the ranks of the US military a sentiment that we were only preparing ourselves for the next war, and we should "March straight to Moscow" was widespread.

When the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the amicable union of two disparate partners crumpled into the Cold War. The fear of communists in the government had never ebbed. Spies had been caught, but many innocents were also rounded up during the close of WWII. On August 29, 1949, the Soviets tested their first atomic device, White Lightning, and the fear exploded into the American conscious.

America, at its Post-War height, was a time of soda fountains and poodle skirts, Jim Crow and Levittown, when the Atomic Age birthed a bizarre fad—uranium prospecting. The Atomic Energy Commission was created in response to the growing tensions between the Soviet Union and America, and the newfound need for permanent armament. They became the only legal

purchaser for uranium mined in the U.S., and they announced they would buy from private

owners, launching the uranium boom. Geiger counters and mining equipment filled the shelves

of Main Street. Miners and married hobbyists struck out for the desert to make their fortunes.

The atom dominated the American unconscious: Lucille Ball hunted for uranium in *I Love Lucy*,

nucliometers sold for $545 dollars, Uranium burgers were sold for 45 cents and Uranium

Sundaes for 35. Popular songs like *Uranium Fever* and *Uranium Rock* filled the airwaves. The

bikini, named after the Bikini Island nuclear tests, exploded in popularity. To this day, a bikini

body is considered desirable. In the '50s, Americans sang and celebrated the atom, this newfound

technology while spending sleepless nights wondering when the bombs would fall.

Their fear was genuine—the Department of Defense urged people to build fallout shelters

—and inexorable in its march from fascination to outright dread. Instructional videos filled with

friendly animals like Bert the Turtle told children to duck and cover when bombs, 450 times

more powerful than those at Hiroshima, fell. Children joked: "You can bend over and kiss your

ass goodbye". Another common joke was "What do you want to be *if* you grow up?" Teachers

reported a change in their students' artwork, especially the increase in drawings of mushroom

clouds. 60% percent of American children reported nightmares about nuclear war.

This fear of utter and total destruction melded with the fear of the other. Ideas like

communists were trying to undermine the American system were believed by a decent minority.

A majority of Americans feared it. In 1946, they'd gained enough traction for Truman to expand

the makeshift wartime loyalty program. Truman then issued Executive Order 9835, directing

government departments to create loyalty boards to evaluate employees and job applicants. More

than five million government employees endured these screenings. 2,700 are estimated to have

been dismissed and 12,000 to have resigned. These numbers do not quantify the true extent of these measures, nor do they measure the suffering of any of the employees who were cleared after endless written interrogatories, hearings, appeals, and months of waiting, sometimes without pay. These hearings did not end with execution or a gulag, but with utter unemployment and social shunning. Many of the victims were government employees who subscribed to Roosevelt's New Deal and the social safety nets put in place during the 1930s.

During this time Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-Wisconsin) stepped into the spotlight with claims of large numbers of communists within the U.S. State Department. The fear of annihilation turned from nervous laughter to torch lit mob. He used it as a platform on which to launch his "anti-communism" crusade. He lambasted the Democratic party, going after New Dealers within the government, portraying any past sympathies with social-welfare as proof of ideological sin. His crusades spread from government halls into Hollywood where Walt Disney and Reagan denounced animators, actors, directors, writers, and producers, creating a free fall of denouncements, ranging from communist sympathies to misconstrued comments. Loud and bullying, he gripped America until the installment of a Republican president who finally shuffled him aside.

The fear of the other remained. The Cold War continued, culminating in the Cuban Missile Crisis—the closest moment of nuclear oblivion the world has ever known—and ending with the fall of the Soviet Bloc. Finally, America stood alone, unchallenged, and the irrational, blind fears of yesterday became a figment, a ridiculous phantasm of our elders.

America is faced with a similar problem with fear today, and although there remains a scapegoat and foreign boogeyman in the form of either China, Russia, or Islamic Fundamentalism, the fear has turned sharply inward.

"What we are living through in America is not only division but a great estrangement. It is between those who support Donald Trump and those who despise him, between left and right, between two parties, and even to some degree between the bases of those parties and their leaders in Washington. It is between the religious and those who laugh at Your Make Believe Friend, between cultural progressives and those who wish not to have progressive ways imposed upon them. It is between the coasts and the center, between flyover country and those who decide what flyover will watch on television next season. It is between "I accept the court's decision" and "bake my cake." We look down on each other, fear each other, increasingly hate each other."

The world is faced with great tumult: global warming's toll is being felt across the world, a mass extinction has been predicted by 2040, authoritarianism is on the rise throughout the West, migration is used as a rhetorical bat to shatter the fragile equilibrium of the European Union and American unity. The internet, and its most recent form, Social Media, once heralded as the bridge-builders of a modern, global world has become a place of vitriolic and tribalism. The algorithms once used to connect people for various hobbies and "likes" has now shifted into a series of bubbles where a user's viewpoint is reinforced and the opposite views hidden from their eyes. Users on both sides of the political spectrum have begun to weaponize Social Media, using it for doxxing, canceling, call-outs, and trolling. Platforms once used to connect have become the abode of fear and anger.

According to a recent poll, seven in 10 Americans believe that the nation's political divisions are at least as big as during the Vietnam War, and 6 in 10 believe Donald Trump's presidency is making the US political system more dysfunctional. Distrust of all government institutions, of the presidency, and with each other is widespread.

"It seems the country is being divided on so many topics and on so many fronts at one time," said Gene Gardner, a retired communications specialist in Blacksburg Va., she continued to call American democracy "a rock-throwing contest."

For the first time in US history, whites are transitioning to a minority within America. "A 2012 study showed that more than half of white Americans believe that "whites have replaced blacks as the 'primary victims of discrimination.'" The demographic shift has done little to comfort minority concerns over discrimination. "A recent survey found that 43% of black Americans do not believe America will ever make the changes necessary to give blacks equal rights." In the wake of Donald Trump's 2016 election Hate crimes have increased by 20%.

Every group feels threatened to some extent. "Whites and blacks, Latinos and Asians, men and women, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, straight people and gay people, liberals and conservatives—all feel their groups are being attacked, bullied, persecuted, discriminated against." Each group's concerns of feeling voiceless and threatened are shouted down by the another group because "it discounts their own feelings of persecution." The world is in the throes of political tribalism, of hatred of the other.

Identity politics exists on both sides of the spectrum. During the civil rights era the Great Society Liberals espoused a group transcending language, a "color-blindness" where all are given opportunities regardless of race, sex, religion, and gender. But during the Reagan era

when conservatives began using the language of "color-blindness" as a means of opposing

policies meant to alleviate racial disparities the notion of "color-blindness"and its transcending

language began to erode. In the '80s and '90s a new movement emphasizing group

consciousness, group identity, and group claims began to materialize on the Left. "With the

collapse of the Soviet Union, the anti-capitalist economic preoccupations of the old Left began to

take a backseat to a new way of understanding oppression: the politics of redistribution was

replaced by a "politics of recognition". Modern identity politics was born."

Sonia Kruks, an Oberlin professor, writes "What makes identity politics a significant

departure from earlier [movements] is its demand for recognition on the basis of the very

grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is quo women, qua blacks, qua

lesbians, that groups demand recognition…The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of

'universal humankind'…nor is it for respect 'in spite of' one's differences. Rather, what is

demanded is respect for oneself as different."

Identity politics did not spring from the mainstream Democratic political party. Barack

Obama, during the 2004 Democratic National Convention, declared, "There's not a black

America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's only the United

States of America."

A decade and a half later America seems a far cry from then-senatorial candidate

Obama's rallying cry. "For today's Left, blindness to group identity is the ultimate sin, because it

masks the reality of group hierarchies and oppression in America." It is historically

acknowledged that white men, particularly white Protestant men, have dominated the nation with

violence and oppression in many instances. Racial inequality and its persistence within the

American system has left many young progressives resentful and disdainful of President Obama's "post-racial" presidency and the belief in his tenure's transformative nature. The Left's idea of identity politics is centered around the idea of confronting rather than hiding the horrors of American history and society. But even the confrontation has shifted.

"In recent years, whether because of a growing strength or growing frustration with the lack of progress, the Left has upped the ante. A shift in tone, rhetoric, and logic has moved identity politics away from inclusion—which had always been the Left's watchword—toward exclusion and division. As a result, many on the Left have turned against universalist rhetoric, viewing it as an attempt to erase the specificity of the experience and oppression of historically marginalized minorities."

A part of identity politics is epistemological: out-group members can't share knowledge possessed by the in-group. (You can't understand X because you're Y). Cultural appropriation insists that "These are our group's symbols, traditions, patrimony, and out-group members have no right to them." For most of the Left, those who speak of universality or "color-blindness" are guilty of indifference at the least and racism at the most. "On college campuses, anyone who doesn't swallow the anti-oppression orthodoxy hook, line, and sinker—anyone who doesn't acknowledge "white supremacy" in America—is racist."

As identity politics gains momentum it subdivides to further identities and groups. Today, there is an ever expanding lexicon of identity on the Left. For example, there are more than 50 gender options on Facebook. As the Left tries to one up itself the divisions grow further and inclusivity is completely replaced with exclusion.

Exclusion has transformed political expression on the Left. At the 2016 Black Lives Matter protest at the DNC in Philadelphia, a protest leader announced that "this is a black and brown resistance march." They asked the white allies to "appropriately take [their] place in the back of the march".

Cultural appropriation, a major tenet for progressives, is rooted in the belief that groups have exclusive rights to their own histories, symbols, and traditions. Transgressions are called out on social media on a daily basis in the form of doxxing, call-outs and cancels: Beyoncé was criticized for wearing a traditional Indian outfit, a high school girl was harassed on social media for wearing a historically Chinese dress for prom, Aziz Ansari was canceled for the expose in babe.net, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-New York) and Ilhan Omar (D-Minnesota) receive daily barrages of online death threats, and GamerGate sought to bring down prominent women within the video game community. This is not to say that some of these methods have not been helpful in the Me Too movement and in the many other progressive upswells, but not everyone is happy on the Left with this phenomenon. "As a progressive Mexican American law student put it, "Liberals have cried wolf too many times. If everything is racist and sexist, nothing is. When Trump, the real wolf, came along, no one listened."

Donald Trump began his political career with the Obama birther conspiracy and his candidacy for president by disparaging Mexican immigrants, "They're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime, they're rapists, and some, I assume, are good people." Arguing that Trump used fear and identity politics is pointless: he is a personification of this era, a Tweeter-In-Chief who is a master of trolling and online as well as offline incitement. But most 2016 Republican

candidates spoke in terms of us versus them, and in anti-immigrant, anti-muslim speech. Marco Rubio famously compared our war with fundamentalist Islam with the war against Nazis. The alt-right, like the Far Left, traffics in identity politics and political tribalism. In Charlottesville, they marched underneath tiki torches shouting, "Jews will not replace us," and the nation watched in horror as the streets of that college town erupted in violence, culminating in the death of Heather Heyer and the injury of dozens of counter-protestors. The alt-right also targets successful POC individuals, for example, Steve Bannon argued that America's "engineering schools are all full of people from South Asian and East Asia…They've come in here to take these jobs…while Americans can't get engineering degrees…[and] can't get a job".

One of the most pernicious and unique aspects of right-wing tribalism of this era is the emergence of the white identity as an endangered, discriminated against group. There is a long history of white identity politics within America, but it has gained a large boost from the Far Left, whose bullying, shaming, and berating has further divided the country, entrenching conservative fears. One Trump voter explained that, "maybe I'm just so sick of being called a bigot that my anger at the authoritarian left has pushed me to support this seriously flawed man." Bill Maher said, "The Democratic party made the white working man feel like your problems aren't real because you're 'mansplaining' and check your privilege. You know, if your life sucks, your problems are real." Discussions on reparations, medicare, social security, and representation have shifted in many white Americans' minds from needed changes to a direct attack for the sins of previous generations. All of this has lent itself to fueling Trump's policies, which have repeatedly caused despair and fear within the liberal, LGBTQ, and POC communities. These include attempted bans of people from predominantly Muslim countries, enforced separation at

the border, attacks on sanctuary cities, and the discussion of a citizenship question on the US

Census, which could dramatically alter the effectiveness of the census, and be used as a political

tool to identify current scapegoats—illegal immigrants.

For decades, the Right claimed individualism as a prime calling card, and many Right-

wing commentators have stated that identity politics were forced upon them, but this is not true.

Fringe elements within the Right have traded on identity politics since they were pushed from

the mainstream during the Civil Rights era. However, fear has allowed these elements to creep

back in. One political commentator said, "feeling as though they are under perpetual attack for

the color of their skin, many on the right have become defiant of their whiteness, allowing it into

their individual politics in ways they have not for generations." David Duke and white

supremacist ideologies are beginning to enter mainstream politics as a result of this tribalism.

A former Never-Trumper's response in the *Atlantic* after the 2016 election sums up this

shift: "My college-age daughter constantly hears talk of white privilege and racial identity, of

separate dorms for separate races (somewhere in heaven Martin Luther King Jr. is hanging his

head and crying)…I hate identity politics, [but] when everything is about identity politics, is the

left really surprised that on Tuesday millions of white Americans…voted as "white"? If you want

identity politics, identity politics is what you will get."

These trends are not only evident in our discourse with one another online, but also in our

personal lives. Since the 2016 elections Americans have cut loved ones from their lives over

political disagreements. "Today, more than one-quarter of Americans (27%) acknowledge

personally terminating a friendship or cutting off a member of their family since the 2016

election." (31% Democrats and 19% of Republicans). The entrenchment of one side against the other has increased.

But we don't all disagree on everything. The majority of Americans (51% percent) believe Trump deserves "a lot" of the blame for political dysfunction over the political parties. Most Americans agree that there needs to be systemic changes with the nation's gun laws, that global warming is a threat to national security and to humanity, and most agree that our discourse has become polluted.

As Americans point to the opposite party and blame them for the country's woes they further entrench the otherness within the United States. The rise of new technologies often bring about birthing pains within communities and change is known to breed fear. Recognizing the patterns within history, of the interconnectedness of the past, present, and future can combat regressive trends that seek to divide us. It is best to remember that fear lurks in the unconscious, unanswered and unknown. It is easy to provoke. It is debilitating, noxious, and blinding. Fear is immeasurable and unknowable once an age has passed, but perhaps recognizing fear as a motivator of action is the first step, and the American people can come together to combat it and its insidious byproducts.