Book Review | *Social Theory of Fear: Terror, Torture, and Death in a Post-Capitalist World*

Maximiliano E. Korstanje

Published online: 31 January 2013
© Maximiliano E. Korstanje 2013


The reasons of state as well as the fear as political mechanism for indoctrination have been historically themes that concerned philosophers and scholars worldwide. Even, the third episode of Star Wars (“Revenge of the Siths”) exemplifies how the logic of republic succumbs over dictatorship. One might speculate that Lucas based his story on some philosophical thoughts, as this movie covers the roots and aftermaths of fear and how it leads the subject to a radical transformation of its being. This fictional landscape reflects the political climate that Americans live in our times, and of course, in a similar trajectory, we can find the work of Geoffrey Skoll entitled *Social Theory of Fear: Terror, Torture and Death in a Post-Capitalist World.*

In this seminal book Skoll defends Wallenstein’s thesis based on capitalism’s collapse. Pushed to a dichotomy between two contrasting alternatives, capitalism, like the Roman Empire, not only has been exhausted but also is globalized to the extent of running a serious risk of collapsing. From this vein, Skoll writes “catastrophes occur when systemic regulators no longer contain the conflict through various institutional responses. Such a crises always hold the potential for bifurcation of the system. Bifurcation occurs at a tipping point where the system stops organizing itself and enter in a chaotic state   (p. 28). The elite’s reaction in times of crisis seems not to be consistent with their own interests. Aristocrats do not try to save the system and its well-functioning, which paradoxically facilitated the collapse. Egocentrism coupled with individual interests and a wider sentiment of fear, are at a first stage, a big problem for involving societies and a sentence of death. Comparable with the Roman Empire’s and Feudal disintegration, late-capitalism’s crisis seems to recur to military-machine expansion to keep the control and trade, but unlike these
Essays Philos (2013) 14:1

Korstanje | 132

past-empires, in our modern nation-state they are inextricably interconnected. As a result of this, the collapse may be very well be further apocalyptic than at other times. The reliance on fear works as a conduit for the status-quo and elites to maintain their privileges.

As the previous argument gives, Skoll introduces readers in a fascinating text, not only very well-written but also illustrative precisely in a theme that now always remains clear. Throughout the existent economic crisis, Skoll adds, 9/11 can be equalled to the Reichstag Fire in 1933 where leaders imposed the need to a preventive attack (against communists) and even beyond the boundaries of Germany. At some extent, the U.S. took advantage of the tragedy that represented the World Trade Center. “Regardless of questions about the origins, causes, or perpetrators of the attacks, 9/11 marked a turning point in the history of the world, because the political and economic leadership took advantage of the opportunity Bush had identified. At this point, and maybe forever, their precise thoughts, plans and strategies remain hidden” (p. 35).

Following this reasoning, the consequent interventions in Middle East follow significant lines based on “military action” to achieve dominance in strategic zones, mass-support in metropolitan towns, and extraction of local resources or surplus from conquered countries. Undoubtedly, for Skoll, the policy of fear conducted by the U.S. and its war on terror are a result of a planned-campaign conducted by ruling classes in times of uncertainty. Of course, whenever these classes feel under attack or in danger, fear allows two important things. The most important is the internal indoctrination that gives sense to a shared-territory and culture, but secondly fear revitalizes consumerism by trivializing the critique.

The diverse chapters that structure this book are suggested but the third can be surely considered the stepping stone of Skoll’s development. Throughout the reading of this book a interesting question arises: Why the Anglo-world supported the U.S. preventive war on terror? A coincidence? Skoll brilliantly said Canada, Australia and the U.K. not only share similar cultural background with the U.S., but also they represent an exclusive club of rich countries that resist slumping down. This sentiment of terror paves the ways for the advent of dictatorship simply because it gradually modifies the rights of people, constitution, and the legal-framework that assures the principle of civility. Skoll’s deep gaze examines slippery matters as torture, fear, local-crime aversion, modernity, evolution and state and the end of liberty in a fluid and all-encompassed way. With this book, one starts to understand the events that characterized the U.S. international strategies in the last years.

Discussing this in depth, the function of the state is to maintain the equilibrium by exerting power and violence over populations. In times of low-conflict, the legitimacy of the state rests on the market, which confers to the system a certain stability. Nonetheless, in contexts
of chaos and disorder the state recurs to violence to refashion the lost order. Similarly, the market mediates among human beings, imposing a state of gratification in lieu of constraints, but in the moment the control weakens, fear seems to be the last attempt to recover legitimacy. Skoll goes on to acknowledge that “fascism exercises social control through deprivation, identification with a powerful leader, and aggression against internal and external enemies. Liberal capitalism replaces denial with indulgence consumerism and lifestyles replace status identifies such a race” (p. 45). Afterwards the attacks in New York in 2001, these subtle forms described in the earlier paragraph set the pace to the logic of fascism. As previously explained, Skoll argues that fascisms (and Stalinism) were certainly constructed under the logic of emergency. These policies permit to the taking of control, suppressing elementary rights.

The hegemony of the liberal mind is associated with consensus and not violence. If hegemonic control is based on two forms, alliances with neighbors and violence, then the U.S. took the monopoly of capital, expanding loans to other developing countries by means of international organisms as World Bank and IMF. The economic dependence of peripheral countries was indeed counter-productive for the U.S. for many reasons. The first attempt to articulate a systematic expansion was the issuance based on interest that created a huge debt, and secondly, a growing sentiment of resentment of the Third World since these loans aggravated their situations. The globalized capital engendered for the liberal state a special form of obedience that in contrast with other authoritarian republics shaped a specific consciousness centered on calculation, cultural consumption and rationale. The policies of terror are the necessary result for U.S. expansion that led involuntarily to the current crisis. While authoritarian regimes suppress the dissent, liberal hegemonies marginalize it. That way, one of the main contributions of Skoll to political fields is linked to the need of reconsidering the roots of democracy and dictatorship, and re-thinks under what context a supposed democratic country can trespass the boundaries of autocracy (the power of only-one) and of course the pervasive role of fear in such a process. Trauma can alter the reality of self, and 09/11 changed forever U.S. policy with respect to international affairs. Like Anakin Skywalker who is afraid to lose Padme, as he lost his mother in pastime, and falls under the hegemony of darkness, now terrorism is progressively altering the sense of democracy in West. It is very difficult to review and explain a book of this nature in no more than 1.000 words, the exact limit for a book-review which is always a oversimplification, but undoubtedly, this is one of the best books I have never read respecting to terrorism and fear.