

**SOCIETY  
OF FEAR**



**HEINZ  
BUDE**

“‘Fear,’ writes Heinz Bude, ‘reveals the direction in which a society is moving.’ Rather than analyzing the symptoms of angst today – proliferating in blogs, self-help literature, and anxiety disorders – Bude masterfully explores the existential, political, and generational experiences that create the conditions for a ‘society of fear.’”

**John Borneman, Princeton University**

From the rise of terrorism to the uncertainties associated with economic crisis and recession, our age is characterized by fear. Fear is the expression of a society on unstable foundations. Most of us feel that our social status is under threat and our future prospects in jeopardy. We are overwhelmed by a sense of having been catapulted into a world to which we no longer belong.

Tracing this experience of fear, Heinz Bude uncovers a society marked by disturbing uncertainty, suppressed anger and quiet resentment. This is as true in our close relationships as it is in the world of work, in how we react to politicians as much as in our attitudes towards bankers and others in the financial sector. Bude shows how this fear is not derived so much from a “powerful other” but rather from the seemingly endless range of possibilities that we face. While this may seem to offer us greater autonomy and freedom, in reality the unknown impact and meaning of each option creates a vacuum which is filled by fear.

What conditions lead people to feel anxious and fearful for themselves and others? How can individuals withstand fear and develop ways of making their fears intelligible? Probing these and other questions, Bude provides a fresh analysis of some of the most fundamental features of our societies today.

**Heinz Bude is Professor of Sociology at the University of Kassel.**

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# FOR THE PEOPLE

# Society of Fear

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Heinz Bude

Translated by Jessica Spengler

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# Society of Fear

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# Preface

If we want to understand a social situation, we must give a voice to people's experiences. The public today is inundated with data on poverty risk rates, the dissolution of the middle class, the increase in depressive disorders, and declining turnout among first-time voters. But what these findings mean and how they relate to one another remains unclear.

There is no question that changes are brewing in the correlation between social structures and individual attitudes. Cognitive psychologists, behavioral economists, and neurophysiologists are therefore turning their attention to the black box of the self, which now has to mediate between these dimensions without the benefit of traditional paradigms or conventional models. The self-help books that are based on their research tout mental activation programs and physical relaxation techniques.

Sociology can play its hand here if it takes itself seriously as an experiential science. Experience is the source of evidence for empirical research and personal life praxis alike. This experience manifests itself in discourse

## Preface

and is based on constructs. But the point of reference for analyzing blog posts, newspaper articles, medical bulletins, or opinion polls must be the experiences that are expressed within them.

One important empirical concept in society today is the concept of fear. In this context, fear refers to what people feel, what is important to them, what they hope for, and what drives them to despair. Fears reveal the direction in which a society is moving, where the flash points are, when certain groups will mentally withdraw, and how doomsday sentiments or resentment can suddenly proliferate. Fear shows us what's wrong with us. Sociologists who want to understand society today must look to the society of fear.



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Heinz Bude, June 2014

I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

T. S. Eliot

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# Fear as a principle

In modern societies, fear is an issue that affects everyone. Fear knows no social bounds. The high-frequency trader sitting in front of his computer is just as susceptible to anxiety as the deliveryman returning to his depot, the anesthetist picking up her children from kindergarten, or the model looking in the mirror. In its substance, too, fear is infinite: fear of school, fear of heights, fear of poverty, fear of heart disease, fear of terrorism, fear of losing social status, fear of commitment, fear of inflation. And fear can develop along any axis of time. We may fear the future because everything has gone so well up to this point; we may feel fear in the present because we worry about our next steps, since a decision in favor of one option is always a decision against another; and we may even fear the past if we think that something we've put behind us might rear its head again.

Niklas Luhmann, whose systems theory of functional equivalents always provides for alternatives in any situation, views anxiety as perhaps the only *a priori* principle in modern society about which all members of society

are in agreement. It is the principle that applies absolutely when all other principles have been qualified.<sup>1</sup> Anxiety can bring the Muslim woman into conversation with the secularist, the liberal cynic with the despairing human rights activist.

But no one can convince someone else that their fears are unfounded. At most, fears can only be contained and dissipated through discussion. Of course, this requires that we accept the fears of our interlocutors instead of denying them. This is a well-known therapy scenario; recognizing your own fears can make you more open and flexible, so you do not need to immediately react defensively and dismissively when fear comes into play.

Though they are obviously diffuse, the fears currently coursing through the public consciousness say something about a particular sociohistorical situation. Through concepts of fear, the members of a society come to an understanding about the conditions of their co-existence: who moves forward and who is left behind; where things break and where chasms open up; what is inevitably lost and what might yet survive. It is through concepts of fear that society takes its own pulse.

In 1932, on the eve of the Nazi era, Theodor Geiger published a classic work of social structural analysis – *The Social Stratification of the German People* – in which he describes a society dominated by fears of displacement, loss of prestige, and defensiveness. He introduces us to the characters typical of the time: the small businessmen with their burning hatred of social democratic cooperatives; the homeworkers with their tiny landholdings who have grown solitary and eccentric on account of their domestic isolation and who tend toward violent rebellion; the young secretaries with

## Fear as a principle

their bobbed hair who are threatened by rationalization and who dream of dashing gentlemen. There are also the miners who gain their sense of self-worth by heroicizing the dangers of their profession, and whose unionized collective interests are not so much institutionally organized and class-conscious in nature as they are comradely and professional; the petty bureaucrats who guard their tiny sliver of power all the more jealously and flaunt it all the more eagerly the more their positions are squeezed by pay grades and internal tasks; the army of young graduates who experience a decline in the value of their education, the disintegration of their status, and the exclusivity of the professional world; and, finally, the various characters from the capitalist class, between whom there is no love lost: the large-scale landowners who find capitalism's intrinsic concept of a global economy unpalatable, the *rentiers* who have a finger in every pie and no loyalty to any particular social roots, the captains of industry who, on account of the relative immobility of their investments, have been tied to specific industrial sites for generations, and the resourceful merchants whose chain stores keep the urban populace stylishly decked out and supplied with delicacies from overseas – and not forgetting those who have been unsettled by the global economic crisis, an irregular class of the unemployed who have nothing to lose, and for whom nothing of permanence seems to be of any value.

In the social portrait that Geiger sketched freely but with lively precision, all of these people were united by the feeling that the social order from which they came had been superseded. The world of salaried employees that emerged from multiple regroupings of the working

class and (in due course) from educated circles, the “old middle class” clinging to its property-owning mentality, and the bourgeoisie of the center collapsing into countless interest groups – none of them found social or political forms of expression with which they could identify, either for themselves or society as a whole. Grizzled old social democracy seemed to be trapped in outmoded ideas, the center appeared more inclusive and encompassing but also had to uphold a Thomist-Catholic social philosophy, and the economic and national liberal parties were reeling just like the social classes and milieus searching for a foothold in the confusion. In a situation such as this, anyone who could pick up on the fears of being overrun, left with nothing, and pushed to the margins, and who could then bundle these fears together and direct them at a new target, could mobilize society as a whole. One year before Hitler took power, Theodor Geiger grasped the vanguard importance of a young generation that was removing itself from history, stylizing itself as an agent of national activism and, in doing so, turning the rumble of fear into the engine of a new age. Today we know that these ranks produced the ideological avant-garde of the totalitarian era, who functioned as the controlling elites of industrial society well into the 1970s in Germany and beyond.<sup>2</sup>

It was Franklin D. Roosevelt, a man admired to this day as a statesman, who put the issue of fear and the strategy of fear absorption on the political agenda of the twentieth century. In his inaugural address as the 32nd President of the United States of America, which he held on March 3, 1933, in the wake of the terrible Great Depression, he found the words that would establish a new type of politics: “The only thing we have to fear is

fear itself.”<sup>3</sup> Free men must not be afraid of fear because this can rob them of their self-determination. Someone who is driven by fear avoids what is unpleasant, denies what is true, and misses out on what is possible. Fear makes people dependent on seducers, guardians, and gamblers. Fear leads to the tyranny of the majority because everyone runs with the pack; it allows one to toy with the silent masses because no one raises their voice in protest, and once the spark has been ignited, it can throw all of society into panicked confusion. We should take Roosevelt’s words to mean that the first and foremost responsibility of national politics is to allay the fears of citizens.

One can view the entire development of the welfare state in the second half of the twentieth century as a response to Roosevelt’s claim. Eliminating the fear of disability, unemployment, and old-age poverty is supposed to form the backdrop for a self-confident citizenry – one which explicitly includes employees – so that they are free to organize themselves in order to express their interests, they are free to lead their lives according to their own principles and preferences, and so that, in cases of doubt, they can stand up to the powerful in full awareness of their freedom. As Franz Xaver Kaufmann might put it, politics of fear leads to “security as a sociological and sociopolitical problem.”<sup>4</sup>

If you fall, someone should catch you; if you are at a loss, someone should advise and support you; if you are born into disadvantage, you should be compensated. This is why the welfare state of today has taken up the cause of providing qualifications to the under-qualified, advice to people and households in debt, and compensatory education for children from underprivileged



families. The purpose of this is not just to combat poverty, social exclusion, and systematic social disadvantage, but to combat the fear of being thrown on the scrapheap, disenfranchised, and discriminated against.

A certain reflexive effect comes into play here. By using the principle of fear as a reference point, the welfare state – with its measures for security, empowerment, and equality – delivers itself up to the world of emotions. Can social security, employment offices that have turned into job centers, or quality assurance agencies for everything under the sun banish our fear of fear? For Roosevelt, coping with fear was the decisive criterion for public happiness and social cohesion. During the election campaign that led to his first victory, he proclaimed that he had looked thousands of Americans in the eye and seen that “they have the frightened look of lost children.”<sup>5</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that the development of the welfare state in the second half of the twentieth century was framed by an unprecedented promise of integration into modern society. The expectation here was that anyone who made an effort, invested in their own education, and exhibited certain capabilities would find a suitable place for themselves in society. Social placement was no longer pre-determined by one's origins, skin color, region, or gender; instead, it could be influenced by will, energy, and a commitment to one's own dreams and desires. The fact that chance played a much greater role for most people than goals and intentions was acceptable because it was thought that, despite everything, you would end up in a position that, in hindsight, you could feel you had earned and deserved.