

Anxiety Attack: Fear, Values and Politics in Australia

by David Bloodwood

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Abstract

The Howard government is often accused of using fear as a strategic tool of government. This paper argues that fear is a pervasive and fundamental emotion in the Western project of affluence. Using "emotional analysis", Hobbes' famous work on the Social Contract is shown to take up and use fear in a specific association with wealth, prosperity and social order. Using the cognitive theory of emotions, a connection is drawn from emotions to values and moral stances. I then draw all this material together to suggest that the fear we associate with affluence points to a pervasive value system in which affluence is valued more highly than any other aspect of life. This view, which arises from the emotional analysis of politics, reframes Howard's use of fear, as well as opening up several potential avenues to examine the political process itself from a different angle. Finally, I urge that emotional analysis of politics can be a useful and supportive adjunct to more conventional vectors of analysis, and may offer the Bellingen Institute a unique and potentially valuable perspective that it can contribute to Australian social life.

Introduction

There's been an increasing awareness in Australia over the last 10 years that the Howard government uses a 'politics of fear' as a key strategic tool. Anxieties about invasion of national borders, about the violence or social disruption of the poor and marginalised, and more recently anxieties about terrorism, have been mobilised increasingly effectively to galvanise and polarise public opinion to Howard's benefit.

We all know, at some level, how this works: an aspiring leader highlights some potential risk, and repeatedly refers to the risk so that it appears it is about to become reality. The leader can then step in and say "It's OK: I can save you from this danger. And only I can save you – the other party is demonstrated to be incompetent because it is not even aware of the danger. But I am strong enough to face this danger and deal with it on your behalf."

Implicit in some of the left wing discussion about Howard's use of fear is the idea that Howard is deliberately generating fear where none existed before.

However tonight I am going to propose that fear is actually a central emotion in Western societies, and that fear and the associated moral stance of defensive aggression pervades public life and has done for centuries. To put forward my view I will offer an emotional analysis of the political process. This is an unusual way to view and understand the political process, and tonight I am using it for two reasons. Firstly, to demonstrate its potential value in helping us rethink politics and the core operations of the political process. And secondly I am using it because I hope that the Bellingham Institute picks it up and uses it as one tool in its project of contributing to Australian social life.

Emotions in the Social Contract

So let's go back to fear. I said that fear has been a key part of social life in the West for centuries. Back in 1651 Thomas Hobbes published what is sometimes called a creation myth for modern Western societies. His story was that, prior to society, only men existed, and they existed in what he called a "State of Nature". This state of nature was in effect a constant battle of every man for himself. There was no safety, no social structure, and every man's life was, in the classic phrase "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short". A whole bunch of men thought about this and realised that if they kept up this constant battle then none of them would win. So they decided to get together and agree amongst themselves to lay down their weapons so that they could all relax a bit and get on with the business of creating better homes and more comfortable lives. If any man wanted to keep fighting, then a committee of men, authorised by the whole group, would restrain him in order to keep the peace. Thus came into being the Social Contract, a contract voluntarily entered into by rational men as a result of rational consideration.

This famous piece of political philosophy has stood the test of time, and some people believe it still is the best encapsulation of the social structure of Western societies to this very day. But now let's have a look at the emotions in this story. Let's do an emotional analysis of it. In the state of nature, it is every man for himself. Every man is on the defensive, since he can be attacked at any moment, and his property or his life taken from him. In other words, every man is fearful of every other man. Hobbes takes this to be the 'natural' state of men. At the time, he had good reason to believe this. Hobbes lived during possibly the most tumultuous and scary period of English history. Only 9 years before his most famous work was published, England was torn by its only civil war. The strife leading up to the civil war had already been slowly intensifying over several decades since the death of Elizabeth I. And in addition, Hobbes could already look back on over 5 centuries of almost continual skirmishing amongst the aristocracy and the monarchy, visible across the English countryside in the form of an astonishing array of fortifications, which commonly formed the nucleus of cities and major towns.

So even before the modern period, fear and its associated stance of defensiveness pervaded the lives of the rich and powerful – that stratum of society which is the model of modern individualism. Hobbes proposed that the

formation of a government of equals was a way to bring peace and prosperity to society. But note that Hobbes' model does not actually resolve or remove the fear. Rather, what he proposes is that the fear can be contained and managed through rational organisation. In his governed society, the threat of violence still pervades. But the government is licensed by the whole group to be even more violent than individuals can be, and thus in effect to win any violent contest.

Another interesting emotional aspect of the Hobbesian creation myth is that violence is not met by placation, or by acquiescence, or with negotiation. Men are imagined to be naturally violent, which means that there is no limit to their violence. Once they start getting angry, there is no stopping them except by even stronger violence. In this scenario the appropriate emotional response to violence is anger to energize oneself in order to meet violence with violence.

I am sure you can see how astonishingly well this story, now 350 years old, still is a useful and accurate descriptor of public life today. Violence in the form of anger and aggression pervade public life, and especially are integral to the adversarial systems in parliamentary politics and the law. Anger however, I am suggesting here, is not actually the underlying emotion. Rather, anger is the vehicle for responding to an underlying fear – fear that we, or at least we men, are violent by nature, fear of each other, and presumably at some level, fear of ourselves.

Fear is, of course, a natural part of human life. Fear plays the important role of signalling danger to us, and when we respond to fear we do so in order to keep safe. And there are many things in the world which it is sensible to be fearful of, apart from other people. It is not all that long ago that Europeans were commonly preyed upon by wild animals. Natural forces like bushfires, earthquakes, and weather events – parasites and diseases, all of course shake our safety. But what I am wanting to point to tonight is the specific way in which Western societies take up and make meaning of fear.

Another significant aspect of Hobbes' creation story is that Hobbes does not mention nature as a shaper of society or as a source of fear. For Hobbes, it is other people who represent the biggest danger. Again, this was amazingly far-sighted. It can be easily seen today that the greatest cause of death is no longer from the effects of non-human forces. Rather our biggest dangers arise from human causes such as war, inadequate distribution of food, and lifestyle derived events such as smoking, driving cars, industrial accidents and lack of exercise.

But while Hobbes focuses on people, his interest is far from humanitarian. His focus on a subset of people (that is, men) to the exclusion of other people and the natural world is informed by his belief that the most important social function is essentially a materialist one: society should create conditions of peace and stability so that people can work hard to generate wealth and prosperity. Not only that; he believes that humans are born with a right to have

everything in the world, and it is the fight of each individual to try to have everything for themselves which creates the original war of all against all.

Thus, already in 1651, in a creation myth for our society, there is the thematic combination of fear with wealth and prosperity. What this means for us Westerners today is that we strongly associate wealth and affluence with fear. At the emotional level, again and again we find that the actual experience of things like lots of money, big houses, good status or any of the other conventional signs of success has very little to do with ease, with celebration, or with contentment. We do not understand our affluent Western lifestyle as our own peculiarly human expression of the magnificent cornucopia of abundance which is the World in which we live. We do not feel affluence is a gift. Rather, emotionally we associate affluence and prosperity with lack, with struggle, with scarcity, and with the ever-present threat of it all being taken from us. In short, we associate our affluence with fear.

I hope this little history reveals something of the significance of emotions in analysing politics. This point of view places in a different light the Howard government's strategic use of fear. Howard is by no means generating fear from nothing. Rather, he is giving a specific shape to the fear which pervades our society. And characteristically, coming from the right wing in politics, his response to the fear is policies motivated by feelings of anger and aggression, and the neoliberal version of individualism, which looks remarkably similar to Hobbes' "every man for himself".

The characteristic left wing response to pervasive Western fear is something closer to guilt: that we should be looking after others less well-off than ourselves because we have so much and they have so little. I personally have a strong bias towards the left wing type of responses, as I suspect most of us do here tonight. But my point here is that neither the left wing or the right wing really directly address that underlying fear. They each respond to it, certainly, and in different ways, but essentially both sides of politics leave the formative emotion and core moral stance of the modern West unexamined and unaddressed. I suggest that the time has now come when the moral and emotional underpinnings of politics and our Western affluence can and should in fact be examined and brought to light – and that this essential task is one the Bellingham Institute may be able to contribute to.

Emotions and Values

Now the other keyword in the title of my talk was "Values", so I will now try as smoothly as possible to segue across to that topic. I'll go back to my observation that, in the West, affluence and prosperity has historically been associated with fear rather than more expansive emotions. I pointed out that we seldom experience our affluence as feelings like contentment, or abundance. Nor do we hold attitudes of respect or wonder towards all the

things we draw from the earth and transform into economic goods. Instead, we associate affluence and goods with scarcity, struggle and threat.

Now all these various feeling-words I have been using – contentment, respect, struggle, threat, and so on - all these various emotions hold within them implicit moral attitudes or ethical stances. The cognitive theory of emotions suggests to us that emotions are not simply internal sensations which traverse our bodies and manifest in characteristic patterns of physical sensation. What is of interest about emotions is that they move us – in effect I am in a different space, or in a different position, having felt, for example, some grief or joy. Emotions move us somewhere – but where is that somewhere? What do they move us from and to? The answer is that emotions move us in relation to ourselves and in relation to others. Emotions substantially shape our stance towards the objects about which we feel the emotions. Consider the different emotions in the following scenario. Walking down the main street I catch sight of a very close friend whom I love, who is at that moment passing in his car. Moments later a person walks past me and I barely notice them. Yet more moments pass and I see a person with whom I am involved in an ongoing conflict.

These three people are all people – they are just people. That’s all they are. But how I feel about them, or in the case of the second person don’t feel about them, very significantly shapes my relationship with them. Not only is relating substantially shaped by emotions. In addition, how we feel about others – the emotional charge we hold in relation to them – gives us reliable indicators of the value each person has for us in our own life.

This is true not only for people but for objects and events as well. And it is true for ideas, concepts, beliefs and views: how we feel about issues is a reliable indicator of their relative value to us, and so is a pointer to our moral stance towards various issues.

Of course, alongside our feeling responses to things, we also have cognitive and rational responses as well. I’m certainly not saying that emotions are the most important aspect of life. Rather, I’m wanting to highlight the fact that emotions play a significant role in our moral value systems. And thus emotions also play a significant role in politics.

The Value of Affluence

Now having taken this little excursion into the connection between emotions and values, I want to apply this to the historical and structural connection between fear and affluence. I pointed out the long history in the West of associating affluence with lack, with struggle, and with threat. All these highly emotionally laden words give us clues to the value we place on affluence. What can help to reveal the type of value we characteristically hold, is to contrast the emotions we do feel with what we don’t feel but could: and here I used the examples of contentment, respect, and abundance.

Putting all this together, one way to encapsulate what emerges is that for Westerners, affluence is not simply one possibility among many. Neither does affluence give us a sense of embedment in the riches of the World. Rather, there is definitely a sense of great urgency, of the sort of tension almost akin to panic. That we must act now before it is too late, that we must as a first priority attend to affluence – because unless we have affluence there will not be enough for us, and because unless we protect and fight for our affluence it will be wrested from us by mysterious dark forces.

The intensity of emotion surrounding this is such that I don't think it is too dramatic to say that emotionally, unless we have access to affluence we feel we will die. In other words, affluence is of greater value to us than anything else. Affluence is our first priority. More important than emotions. More important than other people. More important than love, or beauty. More important than clean water, or fresh air. More important than the pleasure of the sharp bite of frosty air on one's bare skin.

The Role of Emotional Analysis

Now this view of the over-emphasis in the West on affluence is by no means new. Clive Hamilton, in "Affluenza" says something very similar. But what an emotional analysis adds is a much more personalised account of affluence and overconsumption. Hamilton's approach is essentially an extension of the very same materialist value-system which he sets out to critique: his analysis revolves around monetary measures, and quantitative data about economic activity. While this materialist analysis is certainly valuable and is worth doing, it tends to frame solutions in terms of how much less we can consume. On the other hand, emotional analysis enables us to bring in the important questions of what motivates our consuming at the emotional and moral levels, and so it opens the door to solutions like exploring the feelings of lack and panic, and generating feelings of contentment or safety using techniques in relating with other people and with the natural world, which may not so directly involve consuming material goods.

Clearly, Hamilton's solution of downshifting is eminently doable and practical. Given that it involves less work, less debt, and less stress why don't more people do it? I suggest the answer is that it is so emotionally challenging at a personal level for us. And it is so challenging precisely because of the emotions we feel, and the related moral orientation we have, about affluence, wealth and material goods.

Ultimately, then, the biggest potential benefit of emotional analysis is that it can help us to reframe analysis of major political and social questions by helping us make sense of the sometimes intense or overwhelming emotions stimulated simply in the raising of questions – let alone their serious examination. Thus emotional analysis can be a powerful supportive tool alongside the more conventional vectors of analysis.

There is obviously a great deal more that can be said along these lines. One fascinating avenue to explore is to more adequately examine the characteristic left wing and right wing responses to the pervasive association of affluence with fear. I suggested above that those responses are something like anger and guilt. Another avenue is to examine the specifically recent conditions in which John Howard hypes up fear. Two very major forces which come to mind here are the process of detraditionalisation – the dropping of a reliance on tradition for a more calculated and rationalised approach to life – and the process of globalisation and the related rise in the impact of non-Western nations on our daily lives. Both processes inherently involve fear, if only because the scale of change involved is greater than anything since the emergence of the modern era 300 years ago.

A third major avenue for exploration would be the emotional container of the national political process itself – its links with the idea of nation, with the modern Western structure of personal identity, and with the various political approaches to international relations. Fourth, another fruitful area would be the emotions implicit in stances towards the non-human world – again characteristically polarised into the right wing “resource” view and the left wing “conserve” view.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope I have been able tonight to illustrate how potentially useful and revealing emotional analyses of politics can be in order to gain further insight and understanding about the forces shaping public life. What I have offered here is only the barest start, but I hope my exploration of fear has been sufficient to indicate how we might broaden our understanding of the Howard government’s use of fear as a strategy.

My involvement in the Bellingen Institute arises because I have a personal aspiration to have an impact on public debate. Several years ago I realised that, being only an individual with limited energy and resources, I had to be very strategic about the ways in which I attempted to make an impact. A crucial resource which enables strategy, however, is information about the process one hopes to influence. The Institute, being small and new, also faces limitations of energy and resources – and so information about the political process is crucial, especially information which the Institute is able to generate itself, and which may give it a unique edge in the political landscape. Tonight I have put forward an emotional analysis of politics as one potential source of such information, and also at the same time a potential unique and valuable contribution which the Institute could make to Australian political life.

Thankyou