

Heinz Bude (2018) *Society of Fear* (transl. Jessica Spengler)
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Concepts redolent of precarity and risk society underpin this erudite and emotive tour through the theatre of the oppressed and the absurd. Bude paints scenery that evokes the alienation and anomie experienced by Patrick McGowan's *Prisoner*; was he a human being or just No. 6? What Bude achieves in this slim volume is to expose contemporary meanings of fear, the vacuum and nihilism of endless possibilities. The epigram at the start of the book, from T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, brings to mind Waugh's appropriation of it to illustrate the 'dissolution' of society through class changes following the First World War, but also illuminates fear through its 11 short chapters as a sustaining and impelling force not just one that impedes.

Bude reminds us that fear is ingrained in social life through our comparison of ourselves with the other, in our anxieties of exclusion and tendency to 'run with the pack'. He paints a dystopian scene where characters relish the absurdities and anxieties as part of a Hieronymus Bosch painting. First this fear is exemplified in our personal relations, indicated by a post-coital realisation that where we had been joined momentarily with another we are ultimately alone. This is something which, Bude states, threatens our ontological security and subsequently the fear of losing relationships intensifies the desire for attachment. This fear permeates social mobility forcing us to 'climb the ladder' whilst fearing exposure as a 'fraud', being just an *arriviste*. Within our global neoliberal structures we compete for fewer and fewer prizes, demanding continual performance and leading to resentment and shame. Bude's employment of performativity is important, setting his analysis within the context of continental philosophical sociologies. It engages the self ambiguously with society, an agentic fear that reinforces, as well as derives from, the structural.

His analysis is developed within an assumed and existing class system that remains fluid and defined economically. Middle classes are afraid, not for survival, but for loss of status. The precariousness of maintaining income, status, and privilege creates a vulnerability that plays out in social relations towards one another horizontally and vertically between classes. This leads to increasing precarity within lower socio-economic groups who are clustered around groupings that can be exploited, including women, minority ethnic groups and people marginalised by others. The withdrawal of social protections exacts a stress on the body as well as on wider society.

So, Bude argues that the modern self is fragile and overwhelmed by conflicting demands and expectations creating existential fear. He considers how some of the changes in European society have developed since the fiscal crisis of 2008. The fear of maintaining one's position and system collapse results in contemporary anomie as the modern self negotiates these fears whilst fluid benchmarks offer but ephemeral signposts. The intensity of our society of fear is entrenched through control and surveillance of our digital lives, and an economic

shift from tangible monies to control by debt. For Bude this fluid and precarious society exerts a tremendous impact on our emotional being. Paradoxically, it stops us from showing weakness and fear at a personal level whilst promoting a public expression of the fear of the other. He uses current debates of refugee migration in Europe, which he suggests shows the ambivalence between compassion and coldness in humanity. Empathy is tempered by fear of the other, a belief in the strain put upon social systems by the other, and concern for security. These fears are used to control and to exert power and work on the assumption that fear for our status and ourselves provokes and necessitates the fear of others. In the UK we have seen this in June 2016 referendum campaign and subsequent rise of right wing populism as the country is driven towards Brexit.

So, politics becomes based on a fear of standing alone requiring identifications that empower the despotic and legitimise violence against the others. He seems, at times, to emphasise the dystopic at the expense of the potential. However, in a rare acknowledgement of human possibilities and overthrow of the restraining chains of our society of fear he falls back on Bahktin's culture of laughter which represents victory over political and moral fear by flouting all that is forbidden, and encouraging meaningful education of the self to understand and name our fears. He champions the social engagement and realisation of self through relationship (as indicated by Martin Buber):

'Without others there is no self, without ambiguity there is no identity, without desperation there is no hope, without an end there is no beginning. And, in between, we find fear' (p. 118)

This is a short book but one that offers pellucid insights into our condition. It advances our understandings at a time of intensified political, moral and economic uncertainties and control. It acknowledges our need as sociologists to move away from taken-for-granted certainties but to build alternatives to the anxieties of a contemporary *Gormenghast* – the surreal, incomprehensible gothic world created by the twentieth century British writer Mervyn Peake.

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