

**FEAR**

# FEAR

An Alternative History of the World

**ROBERT PECKHAM**

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For Alexander

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'Can there be hope where fear is?'

Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (1605)

'Finally, we live without fear'

Ai Qing, 'Greeting an Intoxicating Spring' (1979)

## Illustrations

Graffiti on the bridge outside the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 23 November 2019. © Micah McCartney.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Triumph of Death*, 1562–3.  
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Train crash at the Gare Montparnasse, Paris, October 1895.  
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*The Enemies of the Five-Year Plan*, 1929. Collection of Russian State Library, Moscow. © Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images.

## Fear

Shoes of victims of Auschwitz at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Oświęcim, Poland. Photo by Kallerna (2019). Reproduced under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence.

George Tooker, *The Subway*, 1950. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. © Estate of George Tooker. Courtesy DC Moore Gallery, New York.

Cover art of *Atomic War!* #1 (November 1952). Published by Ace Comics.

## Preface

I began writing this book in Hong Kong as Beijing cracked down on freedom in the name of security. Months of tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannon couldn't crush dissent, but a pandemic turned out to be the ultimate anti-protest weapon, one that the city's chief executive, Carrie Lam, deployed ruthlessly to stifle opposition. When I resigned from my professorship at the University of Hong Kong in the summer of 2021, friends were being hounded by the authorities, news agencies shut down and opposition leaders jailed. Fear stalked a city that a few years before had buzzed with optimism.<sup>1</sup>

At the height of the protests in 2019, pro-democracy graffiti sprung up across Hong Kong, with walkways and underpasses plastered with posters, colourful post-it notes and catchy pop-art images. One of the messages that moved me most was 'Freedom from Fear'; it was daubed on the glass pane of a bus shelter close to the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, where riot police had besieged students, shattering any illusion of academic immunity. Amid the violence, here was Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 1941 credo, later embedded in the preamble to the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, resurrected by an anonymous protester seventy-eight years later.

*Freedom from Fear* is also the title of a painting by the American artist Norman Rockwell, published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1943 to illustrate Roosevelt's four 'essential human freedoms' doctrine – freedom of speech, freedom of worship and freedom from want and fear. In the picture, two children are

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shown asleep in bed, while their solicitous mother leans in to adjust the sheets and their father looks on, spectacles and folded newspaper in hand. It's a quaint scene of domestic bliss, except that the father is clearly pensive, shadows loom over the group and a doll lies ominously discarded on the floor. We can just make out the newspaper headline: 'Bombings Kill' and 'Horror Hit'.

Rockwell's painting was printed with an essay by the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and novelist Stephen Vincent Benét. 'Since our nation began,' Benét wrote, 'men and women have come here for just that freedom – freedom from the fear that lies at the heart of every unjust law, of every tyrannical exercise of power by one man over another man.'<sup>2</sup> While the image reaffirms the values embodied in the nuclear family, it is also a call to action, a reminder to American citizens that violence will wreck their peaceful way of life unless they step up to defend it.<sup>3</sup>

When, how and why did fear come to be shackled to tyranny and invoked in opposition to freedom, even as it is marshalled in support of this very cause? Answering these questions involves grappling with the long history of fear's exploitation as a tool of power, and a means of both asserting and challenging authority.

There's also the issue of how we characterise 'power', a notoriously tricky word to pin down because it is everywhere and ever shifting – like water, Bruce Lee might have said. We could define it as the ability or capacity to act, as legal and political authority, as the control or influence one has over others, as mental or moral strength, and, of course, there is the power of physical force.<sup>4</sup> Many aspects of these distinct but overlapping notions are discussed in this book, whether in relation to religious institutions, the state, machines or ideas. Fear becomes a lens for reconsidering what power is and how it works, just as the study of power gives us new perspectives on fear.

The argument I make is that many of our assumptions about the relationship between fear, power and freedom are simplistic and even plain wrong. Fear isn't always inimical to freedom but may be its corollary, an integral facet of empowerment. Fear has

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generative potential, even when it appears as a desperate invocation graffitied on a bus shelter. It can be harnessed to change the world, creating new possibilities, even as it forecloses others.

In the chapters that follow, we'll consider the kinds of fear associated with different historical phenomena: natural disasters, pandemics, revolutions, technologies, financial crashes, wars and dictatorships. The book moves from pre-Reformation Europe to twenty-first-century China, from the Black Death to contemporary eco-panics, and will show how fear in one domain can spill over into another, to the extent that it is constantly being redistributed across political, social and technological systems. This 'liquid fear' eludes confinement, evidence of a fugitive property that it shares with freedom.<sup>5</sup>

The book is more than a 'Greatest Hits' compilation of historical fears, though. I'm interested in what fear has meant to individuals and societies in the past, as well as how events have shaped what we think about fear and its uses. On a more practical level, I'll argue that an historical awareness of how fear has been conscripted to serve power may help us avoid being exploited by it in the future. It's not, to use that hoary chestnut of an adage, that those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it; rather, history can be a potent antidote to the fallacies of fear.

Of course, history can also be a focus for fear – and not just in autocracies. In democratic societies around the world it has become central to splenetic debates about race, gender, sexuality, class and culture. Fear is intrinsic to this polarised politics where history is viewed in moral terms, either as a means of extolling traditional values or as grounds for a public reckoning with unexpiated injustices. Both viewpoints preclude any possibility of reconciliation or real change: in the first case, we're given a nostalgic roll call of triumphs, transformations and progressive freedoms; in the second, a relentless recitation of misdeeds. Is it any wonder that hope feels brittle when it's clamped between a contested past and an impossible future?

And what about fear in history? Dynasties rise and fall;

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religions are created, reform and break apart; modern states are born; profits are had, and markets implode; the world is made and unmade – and all, in part, because of fear and its offshoot, panic. Yet if you look up ‘fear’ in the index of most history books, it’s doubtful you’ll find it. Like the background noise in a film, it’s part of the atmospherics. Something that happens incidentally, the almost inaudible soundtrack of real life.

Given its modern-day pervasiveness, it seems perplexing that fear in the past is often downplayed, consigned to a side-show of big events, perhaps because it is hard to discern, too diffused through life to be winkled out as an object in itself. As the poet Louise Glück writes, ‘panic is a synonym for being’; it just *is*.<sup>6</sup> It’s the ever-presence but elusiveness of fear that makes it so thorny, but also hard to resist. How do we evade the effects of an emotion that we can never fully grasp?

Meanwhile, when historians look back at the past, they tend to project modern fears onto earlier times. The great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, writing shortly after the First World War, saw fear as a characteristic of the late Middle Ages. ‘So violent and motley was life,’ he wrote, ‘that it bore the mixed smell of blood and of roses.’ These words probably tell us as much about the fear that hung over war-ravaged Europe in 1919 as they do about the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, when the German physician Justus Hecker dwelt on the terror of the fourteenth-century plague in his book *The Black Death*, published in 1832, he did so against the backdrop of a devastating cholera pandemic that was sweeping Europe. As thousands died, draconian quarantine measures were imposed and civil disturbances broke out, while rumours swirled that doctors, in collusion with government officials, were deliberately killing off the poor. As Hecker put it, ‘the voice of nature was silenced by fear and horror’.<sup>8</sup>

Although recent world events have given urgency to the writing of this book, its genesis goes back decades to my student days backpacking across Pakistan in the late 1980s. It

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was 22 January 1988, to be precise, and I'd hitched a ride from Peshawar across the border into Afghanistan, along with thousands of Pashtun mourners, to attend the funeral of Abdul Ghaffar Khan, otherwise known as Bacha Khan. Together with Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah – the architects of modern India and Pakistan – Khan, a pacifist, had been a prominent figure in the anti-colonial struggle for Indian independence. However, because he'd opposed the partition of India and rejected the North-West Frontier Province's incorporation into Pakistan in 1947, he'd been sidelined and for a time imprisoned and placed under house arrest in Peshawar. His last wish was to be buried in the grounds of his house in Jalalabad, where he'd lived in self-imposed exile during the 1960s and 1970s.

We left at dawn and drove through the Khyber Pass to Jalalabad, past Soviet checkpoints, tanks and truck-mounted rocket launchers. The Soviet–Afghan War was ongoing, but both sides, Soviets and Mujahideen – Islamicist anti-Soviet guerrilla fighters backed at that time by the United States – had declared a ceasefire for Bacha Khan's burial.

When we reached the city, we parked beside a row of battered buses in a crowded plot a five-minute walk from the Khan family compound. By then, thousands of mourners had converged on the modest cluster of buildings, among them the Afghan president and the vice-president of India, as verses from the Quran were recited over a glitchy megaphone.

*Boom.* Suddenly, just as the twenty-one-gun salute began, the crowd was jolted by a loud blast that came from the direction of the parking lot. For perhaps thirty seconds, the ceremony continued uneasily. But then came another explosion, louder this time, and people began to scatter. Jalalabad was under attack.

Moments before, the crowd had been respectfully unified in grief, but now it fractured. People kicked and elbowed each other, desperate to escape. Five of the buses had been bombed, with at least eight people killed and many more injured by flying debris. Vans and cars across from ours had been written

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off. People were dazed, wondering how they would get home. Some were sobbing. Fights broke out and guns were pointed.<sup>9</sup>

As we sped along the main road back to Peshawar, stranded mourners tried to wave us down. Long-bearded Afghans in combat jackets and white shalwar kameez squatted on the roadside. We didn't stop. The driver cursed. The security guard in the back, high on pungent hash, fingered his AK-47 fretfully. Panic, which made us human, also made us cruel.

This memory of fear has lodged in my mind as an awakening, the sudden appreciation of life's full possibilities at the very moment life felt endangered. Robert Burton, author of the seventeenth-century medical compendium *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, understood how fear and sorrow are both 'cause and symptom' of each other, while C. S. Lewis wrote of the 'same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning'.<sup>10</sup> In retrospect, fear and grief come to seem like agents of a moral lesson, teaching us how to live when we think we're going to die.

Experiences of fear, as I'll show in this book, often go hand in hand with attempts to explain how it works. My ordeal in Jalalabad was no exception, leading me on a search to understand the nature of fear and the panic it can trigger. How was it that I'd become complicit in a violence which was motored by a compulsion to get away, that in our rush for self-preservation, none of us in the crowd that day recognised any humanity other than our own? Were we following some pre-coded plot line of panic that we'd unconsciously assembled and internalised from media reports and movies? Was this panic even *real*? All of us at Bacha Khan's wake – his 'Red Shirt' Pashtun followers, Afghan officials, journalists, visiting dignitaries, Soviet troops and bystanders – were part of the explosion we were running from.

Afterwards, when my travelling companions and I talked through our experience, it was evident that the panic had had similar effects on us all. It had both strengthened and diminished our self-awareness. In the general mayhem, we'd

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experienced an acute sense of isolation; the threat of terror had heightened our consciousness of ourselves as individuals set apart from the anonymity of the stampeding crowd. And yet the panic had also eroded our sense of self, sucking us into the collective flight from terror.<sup>11</sup>

In *Crowds and Power*, first published in German in 1960 but more widely publicised after its author, Elias Canetti, won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1981, a fire in a crowded theatre is used to illustrate how panic works on a crowd.<sup>12</sup> Along with contagion, fire is a common analogy for the spread of panic. Like fire, panic *rages*, a striking metaphor that associates both fear and fire with anger. Although the individuals inside the theatre are united by a common fear, there isn't space to act in unison. The crowd, which not long before has been joined in enjoyment of a performance, suddenly and violently breaks apart.

'Only one or two persons can get through each exit at a time,' Canetti writes, 'and thus the energy of flight turns into an energy of struggle to push others back.' This is the paradox of panic: it's a form of collective fear that shatters the collective. In the panicking crowd, everyone fends for themselves: 'Each man sees the door through which he must pass; and he sees himself alone in it, sharply cut off from all the others.'<sup>13</sup> The French statesman and political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville – one of the most astute commentators on modern fear – observed how it acts upon people 'as a mechanical pressure might upon very hard bodies, which are compelled to adhere to one another so long as the pressure continues, but which separate so soon as it is relaxed'.<sup>14</sup> As the cultural critic Susan Sontag put it, 'Fear binds people together. And fear disperses them.'<sup>15</sup>

'It is strange to observe how strongly for the person struggling with it the crowd assumes the character of fire,' Canetti tells us. 'The people he pushes away are like burning objects to him; their touch is hostile, and on every part of his body; and it terrifies him.' As we fled from Bacha Khan's burial place

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in Jalalabad, we were all alight, individually and collectively 'tainted with the general hostility of fire'.<sup>16</sup>

Our panic had an imagined cause: fear of death extrapolated from the sound of bomb blasts. One neurobiological interpretation might be that in the face of a presumed threat, a hardwired emergency response system had kicked in, short-circuiting the 'thinking' part of our brains. Panic was the outcome of a synaptic communiqué.

Or was it that some primitive instinct had showed its rump? Like many of his contemporaries, the early twentieth-century Scottish psychologist William McDougall thought that panic was the relic of a feral past. 'The panic,' he wrote, 'is the crudest and simplest example of collective mental life.'<sup>17</sup> It's an idea that has been remarkably enduring: our basic urges may have been tamed by civilisation, but they've never been wholly dispelled. A related version of this theory crops up in histories that view fear as the first stage in a process of human advancement that leads to modern enlightenment, a transformative arc that's often imagined in terms of a child's maturation to adulthood. As human societies evolve, primordial fear is banished to the edges of rational life, although it continues to break out periodically to disrupt our inexorable development.

In all such fear theories, panic is the convulsion of a hardwired reflex that shatters dreams of human progress. This is what the Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal calls the 'vener theory', the belief that civilisation is a layer of culture that humans impose upon their animal selves. Essentially, we make morality to keep a lid on our basic biology. But all it takes is a violent shake-up – a bomb blast, for instance – and the mask slips to reveal the inner ape.<sup>18</sup> Panic is what lurks beneath and threatens to pierce the thin skin of human cultivation. Our lives have a higher purpose until an elemental ferocity rips the script and we're back where we began.

Except that wasn't how we experienced it, and nor is it how I remember it. The panic belonged to a specific moment: the

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afternoon of Friday, 22 January 1988, in Jalalabad. Buried within the specificity of that moment was an expansive history that linked me to Bacha Khan, Indian nationalism, British colonialism, imperial geopolitics and post-colonial struggle – the bitter seeds of what thirteen years later would become George W. Bush's 'war on terror', as America's erstwhile allies, the Mujahideen, transmogrified into the new enemy, part of Bush's nefarious 'axis of evil'.<sup>19</sup> The panic that day, so fleeting and fatal, accommodated all of these. It was biological, but it was more than biology: it was scripted, and it was improvised; it had deep roots in history, and it had a long future yet to play out.

It was also part of a political calculation; the chaos had been planned. After the bombing, Afghan officials placed responsibility on the US-funded Mujahideen but the guerrillas denied involvement. On their side, Pakistani government sources accused Afghan police operatives of trying to undermine the Pakistani state, which had guaranteed the safety of Bacha Khan's mourners.<sup>20</sup> Whatever party was to blame, the bombing had been designed to trigger panic in order to frustrate any possibility of political accommodation; it had helped to perpetuate a climate of mutual fear in which sectarian violence could thrive; and it had linked the backyard theatre of Bacha Khan's funeral with an emerging theatre of global war.

I make two arguments in this book. The first is that different political regimes are enabled by the production of different kinds of fear, just as counter-fears, often unforeseen, disrupt the smooth operation of those regimes, sometimes shattering them, but often creating a pressure on them to evolve. Viewed like this, fear isn't just the tool and nemesis of power; it's also the reactive agent that can force change. Power resembles technology in that there's no steady accumulation, but components of one power regime recombine to create a new system. Elements of what came to be called 'feudal' kingship recombined to produce absolutism, components of which in turn formed the building blocks of the modern state. 'We can say that

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technology creates itself out of itself,' the economist W. Brian Arthur has said. The same holds true for power that 'bootstraps itself upward' through the reassimilation of pre-existing constituents, creating itself out of itself. And if we stick with this analogy, fear is the catalyst that makes this 'recombinatory evolution' possible.<sup>21</sup>

Tracing the history of fear can help us rethink assumptions about the nature of power, freedom, egalitarianism and market capitalism. We've been taught to think that fear is antithetical to democratic systems; in contrast to fear-dependent autocracies, where the repressive state uses terror to subdue its citizens, democracies, we're told, protect us from coercive infringements on our lives. This is the book's second claim. It is a mistake to assume that modern freedoms have been won by the abrogation of fear from political life. On the contrary, as we'll see, state-sponsored fear has played a crucial role, not only in the ascent of modern freedom but also in the emergence of the economic order on which it has been built.

# Prologue

## Is This Fear We're Feeling?

In Marshall Heights, a neighbourhood of south-east Washington, DC, residents live with the ever-present threat of gun crime. 'Fear,' proclaimed a 2021 report in the *Washington Post* about the district, 'is part of everyday life.'<sup>1</sup>

In Hong Kong, a national security law was introduced in June 2020 to quell anti-government protest. Vaguely defined activities from 'subversion' to 'collusion with foreign forces' are classified as crimes that may lead to life imprisonment. 'If they can induce fear in you, that's the cheapest way to control you and the most effective way,' the newspaper publisher and pro-democracy campaigner Jimmy Lai told the BBC before he was hauled off to jail. 'To live your life in fear is worse than losing your freedom,' observed the Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei, now living in self-imposed exile in Portugal.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, Russian T-64 tanks and SU-27 fighter aircraft were blasting their way across Ukraine. 'I'm in Kyiv, and it is terrifying,' a Ukrainian journalist told the world as she woke to bombs and sirens. 'I felt fear crawling in my guts,' she wrote, 'as if someone, maybe Mr Putin himself, had grabbed my heart and squeezed it.'<sup>3</sup> 'We are not afraid of anything or anyone,' Ukraine's defiant president, Volodymyr Zelensky, declared in a video press conference from his bunker in the besieged capital, as violence unspooled across the country.

And since March 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that a rapidly spreading coronavirus had become pandemic, much of the world has been in the grips of

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*coronaphobia*, 'a new emerging phobia specific to Covid-19'.<sup>4</sup>

It isn't just gun crime, autocratic rule, war and viral disease that generate fear. It's terrorism, cyberattacks, government conspiracies, immigrants, economic ruin, climate change and much more. In 2022 a US survey listed corrupt government officials, loved ones dying or falling sick, a nuclear attack by Russia, the United States' involvement in a world war, financial and economic collapse, pollution and biological warfare among the nation's top ten fears.<sup>5</sup>

As the philosopher Brian Massumi writes, 'naturalized fear, ambient fear, ineradicable atmospheric fright', has become the ubiquitous, 'discomfiting affective Muzak' that may well be remembered as 'a trademark' of our age.<sup>6</sup> Novel technologies, it's argued – above all the rise of the internet, along with a 24/7 news cycle – have created new vectors for distant terrors to cross borders with unprecedented speed. After 9/11, the 2008 financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, we're more fearful than we've ever been.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps we should attribute a portion of these fears to the so-called 'probability neglect', which is when a potential risk triggers such an intense emotional response in us that we confuse possibility with probability and overlook the fact that it's unlikely to occur. According to the 'loss aversion' hypothesis developed in behavioural economics to explain decision-making and risk, we tend to be more concerned about avoiding losses than we are about making gains, more fearful of things going wrong than we are hopeful of things going right.<sup>8</sup>

While some fears may arise from credible threats, others appear exaggerated, even imaginary. You could argue that there's a dissonance between proliferating fears and evidence that the early twenty-first century is arguably the safest era in history, with rising life expectancy and a marked fall in extreme poverty and war, even though glaring inequalities and violence persist in many parts of the world.<sup>9</sup> In 2022 the World Bank declared that global progress in reducing poverty had stalled,

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with over 700 million people living below the extreme poverty line, the majority in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>10</sup> Viewed from the ruins of Homs or Aleppo, or the Ukrainian port city of Mariupol, the world doesn't look so bright. Or from neighbourhoods of Detroit, St Louis and Memphis, for that matter, which are often ranked among America's deadliest cities.

In this book I'll argue that fear is a means to power, and that it's stoked by those who stand to gain from it, whether they're politicians, religious movements, media organisations, tech companies, big pharma or financial institutions.<sup>11</sup> But more than that, the condemnation of fear-for-profit is itself a political stratagem, as when those who campaigned for the UK to leave the European Union in the 2016 Brexit referendum accused their opponents of instigating 'Project Fear'. At the same time, the long history of fear-for-profit raises an important secondary question: how do we break free of this exploitative cycle? And if we were to succeed, what would happen to all the public-spirited interventions that rely on the strategic use of fear to influence our behaviour? Don't we need fear to take our problems seriously?

Although it may serve as a means of control, fear's protean properties make it difficult to manage. As we'll see in subsequent discussions of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century technology and financial crashes, fear and a disposition to panic were understood by many contemporary commentators as inherent facets of an industrialising world where new freedoms brought new risks.

But first, what is this fear we're talking about? The word, after all, covers a disconcertingly vast spectrum of experience. It describes an emotional state and is used as a shorthand for complex psychological and physiological processes. It's a net so large that it ensnares the mass event and the individual experience. Our lexicon of fear branches into such a variety of not-quite-equivalents that it's easy to get lost in definitions: anxiety, angst, terror, dread, horror, panic, hysteria and so forth.

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'Fear is the anticipation of pain,' wrote the psychologist Granville Stanley Hall in the late 1890s, echoing Aristotle, who famously defined fear 'as a pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future'.<sup>12</sup> Hall, the inaugural president of the American Psychological Association, set about classifying different kinds of fear, based on feedback from a questionnaire he'd sent to 748 participants in one of the first ever public surveys on the subject. He was flummoxed by the plethora of phobias he uncovered: fears of wind, thunder, meteors, darkness, fire, water, solitude, guns, dirt, mechanical vehicles, dogs, cats, snakes, spiders, bugs and beetles, the sight of blood, strangers, disease, death, ghosts, witches and sin, to name a few.

Hall's aim wasn't to get rid of fear, which he considered necessary to human progress: 'fears', he wrote 'are the roots of so many of the strongest intellectual interests'. Instead, he wanted to understand where fears came from and what function they performed. The problem was, with so many kinds of fear, where should he begin?<sup>13</sup>

An elevator-pitch definition of fear might be a neurobiological process to keep us alive. The language we use seems to point to an instinct for self-preservation. The English noun 'terror', for example, shares an ancient root with the word 'tremble', while 'horror' and 'anxiety' derive from Latin verbs meaning to bristle and to tighten or asphyxiate, suggesting physiological responses to some perceived threat. Despite the received wisdom that we ought to overcome, conquer or resist fear, the fact is that it's a survival mechanism, shielding us from harm.<sup>14</sup> The nature of that mechanism, however, is debated.

It was Charles Darwin who popularised the idea that emotions are innate mental states that we express via a repertoire of facial actions and behaviours, some of which are instinctive and others acquired.<sup>15</sup> Contemporary neuroscientists have tended to go along with this theory, identifying bundles of cells in two almond-shaped regions of the brain, called the amygdalae, that

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act as epicentres of an emergency detection system. A cluster of neurons there decode external stimuli that indicate threats, sparking physiological responses – perspiration, increased heart rate, shortness of breath – and reflex behaviours, including fight or flight.

In recent years, however, this explanation has been challenged, and some scientists now believe that fear can't be localised in this way. What we call 'fear' may not be part of a specific neurological circuit after all but is probably distributed across different functions of the brain. And while the amygdalae appear to have an important role in threat memories, evidence has indicated that it's possible to experience fear even when they are damaged.<sup>16</sup>

It turns out, then, that there's little scientific consensus about how fear is produced or, for that matter, what it is. In fact, as early as 1884, the philosopher and psychologist William James had challenged the assumption that fear is an automatic response to an external threat. While common sense tells us that when we meet a bear we're frightened and run, he hypothesised that it's only in hindsight that we register our subjective response as 'fear'. 'My thesis,' he wrote, 'is that the bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion.'<sup>17</sup>

The neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux at New York University's Emotional Brain Institute agrees that the feeling is the emotion, but, contrary to James, argues that bodily responses are not an essential ingredient.<sup>18</sup> He says that we should regard fear as distinct from the expression of defensive behaviours triggered by external stimuli. They often go together because they are both elicited by the same stimulus but have different effects in the brain. As LeDoux writes, 'Fear, anxiety, and other emotions are, in my view, just what people have always thought they were – conscious feelings.' In other words, fear belongs to our 'emotional consciousness' and, like all our emotions, it's a

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cognitive construction, a mental model of the situation that not only determines how we feel but also allows for a novel, consciousness-based decision-making and behavioural control process.<sup>19</sup>

But how should we differentiate fear from the other terms with which it overlaps? Although 'fear' and 'anxiety' can't be understood apart from one another, from his research LeDoux concludes that 'different brain mechanisms are engaged when the state is triggered by an objective and present threat as opposed to an uncertain event that may or may not occur in the future'.<sup>20</sup> This isn't just armchair posturing. Failure to recognise the difference between subjective fear and its objective correlated responses, LeDoux suggests, accounts for the failure of medications that have been developed to treat mental illness by testing their effects on animals.<sup>21</sup>

It's easy to become over-fixated on terminology, to the extent that a history of fear might end up becoming little more than a hair-splitting exercise in semantics. Perhaps this is the point at which we ought to resurrect the Austrian-born philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of semantic 'family resemblances'. Words, he suggested, don't capture the essence of some external object or idea, but exist in relation to a network of other words with similar meanings. Viewed from this perspective, fear is part of a family comprised of many words with strong resemblances, such as anxiety, terror, fright, panic, hysteria, paranoia and so forth.<sup>22</sup> It may be that fear's power lies precisely in its murkiness, ambiguity and durability as an emotion, behaviour, idea and tool.

Over-emphasising neurobiological arguments also minimises the issue of how emotions have been defined in history, and the differences in how they've been experienced and understood. Our hardwired capacity to detect and respond to an imminent threat is related to but distinct from the fear that's generated by the neocortex, the part of the human brain associated with higher cognitive functioning. In the latter case,

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fear is assembled in a process of categorisation, where previous experiences are pulled together and compared. To assess a potential threat, we draw on a repository of past experiences. Fear is shaped by our previous encounters; through our ancestry, upbringing and membership of a given community, we're socially primed to experience it in specific ways.

As soon as we recognise that fear has this acquired social and cultural dimension, we concede the possibility that it may be unlearned, and our responses modulated. 'Fears are educated into us, and can, if we wish, be educated out,' the American psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote in 1927.<sup>23</sup> Understood like this, fear is personal, tribal and adaptive. In contrast to the core biological threat-detection-and-response function, it is contingent and acquired. It is also central to how societies are organised and regulated, and it is manifest in distinct ways at different times and in different cultures. That's why, if we are to grasp the nature of fear, we need to understand its histories and the local contexts in which it arises.

If we approach fear in this way, as a composite cultural and neuroscientific phenomenon, we begin to see that it is in many instances a response to uncertainty. In LeDoux's compelling formulation, anxiety is 'the price we pay for our ability to imagine the future'.<sup>24</sup> In effect, fear and anxiety pull us in two directions: they draw on the past to forewarn of a possible future.

Capturing the fear of uncertainty and manipulating its twin hope have long been the basis of power. Writing in 1605, the English philosopher and statesman Sir Francis Bacon enumerated the political benefits to be had from playing off the 'predominant affections of fear and hope' against each other in order to keep a lid on rival factions within the state.<sup>25</sup> Bacon's contemporary the English scholar and clergyman Robert Burton used a striking metaphor from siege warfare when he described fear and hope as the Devil's 'two battering-Cannons and principal Engines, with their objects, reward and punishment'.<sup>26</sup>

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Fear isn't necessarily a top-down affair driven by the political elite; it can also derive from bottom-up populist concerns which are fuelled by charismatic, autocratic-leaning 'anti-establishment' leaders and their parties. Political fears are now coming from two directions: from those anxious about the consequences of disruptive populism and from populist movements distrustful of the media and state institutions, such as Donald Trump's Make America Great Again brand of American Republicanism, or Viktor Orbán's Civic Alliance in Hungary. 'Anger and fear is what gets people to the polls,' Trump's former chief strategist, Steve Bannon, insists.<sup>27</sup>

Neither is fear necessarily despotic or tyrannical. It can be beneficial, working as a social glue and a check on power. Likewise, it may be integral to freedom. In his book *The Concept of Anxiety*, published in 1844, the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard argued that an individual's capacity to make free choices may induce paralysing anxiety, even terror. He asks us to imagine that we're at the top of a cliff, gazing down at the ground far below. While we recoil in horror at the prospect of falling into this 'yawning abyss', we also feel a terrifying compulsion to throw ourselves off the edge simply because we can. Our very freedom to choose, Kierkegaard suggests, creates frightful possibilities, a mind-crushing vertigo that he calls the 'dizziness of freedom'. Fear and freedom turn out to be inseparable, not antithetical.<sup>28</sup>

At the same time, the political, religious and social systems we live within – whether democratic or totalitarian, secular or theocratic, liberal or illiberal – are the outcome of struggles to corral, instrumentalise and neutralise fear. British abolitionists in the late eighteenth century dramatised the terror of slavery as a means of ending it, while democratic states have used fear to galvanise collective action. The medieval Church, absolute monarchies, colonial states and liberal democracies have all recognised the power of fear and developed strategies for co-opting it to their cause. In many ways, the modern world was made by fear.

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This book traces the history of roughly 700 years of fear. The story begins in the fourteenth century, when the Catholic Church's monopoly on fear in western Europe was challenged by a series of catastrophic events, including a devastating plague. By the seventeenth century, European states had been forged out of political and religious strife. Soon they began to carve out empires in the Americas, Asia and Africa, exporting Western assumptions about fear and its management around the globe. This traffic in fear was far from unidirectional, though, since European exposure to non-Western societies provided a comparative framework for reflecting on fear at home, along with a new appreciation of the ways that culture shaped the human 'passions'.

Modernising processes distributed power and fear in new ways. By the nineteenth century, bureaucratisation had effected far-reaching social transformations. A rising professional class began to flex its muscles; as societies became more urban and industrialised, power dispersed. In factories, workers became dependent on the vagaries of the market and the logic of supply and demand. The wealth and influence of financiers and industrial leaders, along with a vocal bourgeoisie, forced the political establishment to accommodate their interests. Concurrently, the rise of the 'masses' and the spectre of popular dissent created a dynamic that challenged this accommodation. It is the tension between these forces – the citizen and the state, the individual and the mass, nation-building and globalisation – and the entanglement of fears they produced that we'll explore. The capitalisation of fear, particularly in the late nineteenth century and the twentieth, is the focus of the second half of the book.

Today, while centralised states continue to form the organisational basis for national economies and societies, corporations have exploited new technology to create global communities of users that cut across state boundaries. The possibilities and

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vulnerabilities created by this technological convergence pose a growing challenge for state authorities, particularly in the management of fear.

Although I'll argue that power depends on fear, I'll also trace the unforeseen consequences that have stemmed from attempts to manipulate it: how the abolition of one fear invariably gives rise to other countervailing fears; how terror arises out of efforts to suppress the despotic use of fear; how fear is summoned as justification for political or social change; and how fears are marketed to us by businesses that trade on our hopes. Fear is integral to the booming 'happiness market' that sells us positivity with the veiled threat of everlasting misery. 'Every saving invention and every intellectual advance,' Martin Luther King once remarked, 'has behind it as a part of its motivation the desire to avoid or escape some dreaded thing.'<sup>29</sup>

Historians, philosophers and political scientists have tended to write about fear as if it were either a cultural or a political phenomenon, as if culture can somehow be unhitched from politics, or politics removed from the social world that shapes it.<sup>30</sup> And the emphasis for the most part has been on the corrosive nature of the emotions in public life, with fear viewed as a pernicious influence that feeds on ignorance and perpetuates inequalities and discrimination. 'Fear,' wrote the poet and cultural critic bell hooks, 'is the primary force upholding structures of domination.'<sup>31</sup>

In the 1940s the American historian Arthur Schlesinger cautioned that fear was disabling democratic processes. Industrialisation and unregulated capitalism, buttressed by technology and science, had created 'a terrifying problem of adjustment', which risked driving disaffected citizens into the arms of totalitarianism. As he put it, 'fear and want' were undermining democracy, providing an ideal climate for communism to take seed.<sup>32</sup>

The German-Jewish psychoanalyst and philosopher Erich Fromm, who fled to the United States in 1934 after the Nazis

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were elected to power, argued that, while democracy may have set people free, it had created societies in which individuals felt 'powerless and alone, anxious and insecure'. It was in order to escape from this alienating freedom that they willingly submitted to authoritarian rule. Democracy, he argued, had produced the social and psychological conditions within which Nazi ideology could thrive.<sup>33</sup>

Schlesinger and Fromm weren't alone in grappling with the problem of fear and freedom during and in the aftermath of the Second World War, as Stalin intensified his repression in the Soviet Union. Among other books, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* appeared in 1949 and Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951. In different ways, these writers contended with the nature of political fear, totalitarian terror and the threats that they posed to the liberal order.

'Power based on love,' Mahatma Gandhi said in 1925, 'is a thousand times more effective and permanent than the one derived from fear of punishment.'<sup>34</sup> But while democratic leaders like Gandhi and Martin Luther King may have cultivated love to promote their causes, from the late twentieth century the emphasis has been on less positive political emotions. Writing in the 1990s, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the start of war in Afghanistan and genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda, the Canadian writer and politician Michael Ignatieff warned: 'In the twentieth century, the idea of human universality rests less on hope than on fear, less on optimism about the human capacity for good than on dread of human capacity for evil, less on a vision of man as maker of his history than of man the wolf toward his own kind.'<sup>35</sup>

'Convinced that we lack moral or political principles to bind us together,' writes the American political scientist Corey Robin, 'we savor the experience of being afraid, as many writers did after 9/11, for only fear, we believe, can turn us from isolated men and women into a united people.' According to Robin, this politics of fear is sapping our belief in universal values – justice

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and equality, among them – that undergird democratic institutions, ultimately weakening their legitimacy, as well as our faith in them. When we succumb to fear in this way, we unwittingly oblige the self-serving interests pushing it, which is another reason, he says, that ‘fear is not, and cannot, be a foundation of moral and political argument’.<sup>36</sup>

But not everyone sees it this way. Another line of reasoning holds that fear keeps us alert to potential infractions on our rights and attentive to the state’s repressive instincts.<sup>37</sup> And the biggest threats to our freedom may come from within, often from the exorbitant measures implemented to protect that freedom. In his inaugural presidential address, delivered in March 1933 during the Great Depression – best known for the slogan ‘The only thing we have to fear is fear itself’ – President Roosevelt declared his intention of asking Congress ‘for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis – broad Executive power to wage a war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe’.<sup>38</sup> Roosevelt is rightly remembered today for the ambitious New Deal measures he took to meet the crisis, but the point is that fear can be used to justify dangerous states of exception anywhere, even by progressive reformers.<sup>39</sup>

These quarrels over the uses and abuses of fear reflect different ideas about what freedom is and how it has been understood historically. It’s been argued that our modern conception of freedom arose in the course of the nineteenth century as a counter-revolutionary reaction by an elite to ‘fears that the newly enfranchised masses would use state power for economic redistribution’. Freedom was espoused as a safeguard against the dangers of democratic extremes and as a means of warding off the economic threat posed by popular power.<sup>40</sup> But is the longing for freedom innate in humans, regardless of culture? Does freedom mean freedom from others meddling in our lives, or freedom to shape our own destinies? Is it ‘the absence of external pressure or is it also the *presence* of something – and

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if so, of what?'<sup>41</sup> Is it negative or positive: freedom *from* some putative threat, or freedom to *do* as we wish?<sup>42</sup> And are we really ever free if we depend on the will of another, simply because there is always a possibility of interference?<sup>43</sup>

While debates such as these may have become more heated over the last decade, they are hardly new. In the nineteenth century, as education expanded and industrial societies democratised, many commentators noted the complex relationship between freedom, equality and fear. Tocqueville, who studied America's political system in the early 1830s, wrote about his fears and hopes for the 'great democratic revolution'. The second volume of his monumental *Democracy in America* highlights the unsettling contradictions that democracy produces. Citizens in democratic states, he reflects, are haunted by a 'fear of anarchy [that] holds them constantly in suspense and always ready to throw out their freedom at the first disorder'. In this circular conundrum, the end leads back to the beginning: freedom creates equality which generates fear which jeopardises freedom.

Like Kierkegaard's 'dizziness of freedom', Tocqueville describes how citizens, ever fearful of the possibility of lawlessness, 'dread their free will; they are afraid of themselves'. But he also notes that fear may function as a crucial defence against despotism. 'Let us therefore have that salutary fear of the future that makes one watchful and combative,' he concludes, 'and not that sort of soft and idle terror that wears hearts down and enervates them.'<sup>44</sup>

The problem with polarised arguments about fear and liberalism is that they imply a zero-sum game – you either hustle for fear or you don't. But why should an adherence to the principles of freedom and justice preclude recognising the positively charged nature of fear, which isn't only mobilised to uphold the status quo but may challenge authority in ways that effect favourable change? The history of fear, I'd suggest, is more hopeful than many accounts would have us believe.

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Besides, most discussions of political fear stress its perturbing, antagonistic nature, omitting just how integral it has been to the creation of political rights and liberties. While freedom may imply freedom from some potential threat, the fear of loss, I'll argue, is inseparable from the hope that must drive any commitment to social justice. We would do well to reflect on the seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza's claim that 'There is no hope unmingled with fear, and no fear unmingled with hope.'<sup>45</sup>

'Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it,' the Myanmar politician Aung San Suu Kyi has written. 'It is not easy for a people conditioned by fear' to free themselves from its 'enervating miasma' – and yet it has never been more important, as we enter an era of insidious, mediatised fear.<sup>46</sup> A better understanding of the history of fear may be a first step towards rethinking the role that it plays, not only in shaping institutions of power but also in our understanding of freedom and its possibilities.

# 1

## The Great Pestilence

Modern humans and our ancestors have probably been fearful for millions of years. It may well be that our emotional responses have their origins in a deep evolutionary past, and that many of our phobias – of snakes, spiders and darkness – are responses to the risks faced by our hunter-gatherer progenitors, which remain embedded in our neural circuitry. As the evolutionary biologist Gordon Orians has suggested, we're haunted by ghosts of habitats and predators past. 'The typical objects of fears and phobias pose little danger in modern societies,' he writes, 'yet our fear and avoidance of the feared object persists.'<sup>1</sup>

Darwin reckoned that all humans share emotional expressions and behaviours, which he called 'the language of the emotions', inferring from his research that 'fear was expressed from an extremely remote period, in almost the same manner as it now is by man'.<sup>2</sup> The American psychologist Paul Ekman likewise believes that human emotions are universal and that we're programmed to recognise facial expressions associated with anger, disgust, happiness, sadness, surprise and fear – although many scientists argue that emotional experiences are personalised and differ between cultures.<sup>3</sup>

Fear may be present in the paintings etched on cave walls by our Palaeolithic forebears, in the megafauna that overshadow the timorous stick men hunters that hang back on the margins and in those ominous 'therianthropes', half human and half non-human animal beings with beak, snout and tail discovered in 2017–18 on the island of Sulawesi, Indonesia – rock art dating

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back at least 43,900 years – which must have appeared particularly terrifying when viewed by the flickering light of a fire torch or grease lamp.<sup>4</sup>

By the time *Homo sapiens* began to domesticate plants and animals, and settled in villages and cities during the Neolithic period some 12,000 years ago, the threat of predatory beasts had been superseded by other fears: political tyranny, inter-community violence, droughts, blights, famine and disease. In Jared Diamond's dismal assessment, the agricultural revolution may have been 'the worst mistake in the history of the human race'.<sup>5</sup>

The British archaeologist Ian Hodder, who oversaw excavations of the 9,000-year-old Neolithic settlement at Çatal Hüyük in south-central Turkey, has suggested that the images of fearful creatures that adorn the walls of houses there – including a painting of vultures with seemingly human legs lunging at a headless human figure – functioned as a way of domesticating fears of the wild.<sup>6</sup> Fear and faith interlocked in these new societies, working to ensure an increasingly hierarchical social and political order, and an economic system reliant on new divisions of labour.

The earliest forms of writing appeared in Mesopotamia around 3400 BCE. While the first cuneiform records – signs inscribed on clay tablets and other artefacts – consist of lists used for administrative and accounting purposes, the Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh, probably composed from the second millennium BCE, tells of the multiple fears that haunt the citizens of Uruk, a powerful Sumer city state on the Euphrates: fear of death and the underworld where the dead dwell in darkness; of the wilderness beyond civilisation and the end of the world patrolled by half human-scorpion monsters; and the tyrannical behaviour of the unreformed young Gilgamesh, Uruk's mythical ruler.

According to the controversial Axial Age hypothesis proposed by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers in the 1940s, new religious and philosophical systems emerged independently

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across Eurasia during the first millennium BCE, forming a new civilisational 'axis'.<sup>7</sup> The Analects of Confucius, the Upanishads and Bhagavadgita, the teachings of Buddha, the Hebrew prophets and the Greek philosophers – all emphasised the importance of self-reflection and self-discipline. Written language, in conjunction with prayer, meditation and argumentation, became a crucial social and psychological tool.<sup>8</sup> Together, these innovations not only transformed how humans understood the world but ultimately shaped their behaviour, creating a new capacity for managing thoughts and feelings, fear among them.

Fear certainly had its political uses in antiquity. The ancient Greeks had different words to convey fear, including *deos*, which derives from the root word 'two' and suggests that fear occurs when a person is 'in two minds', and *phobos*, which is etymologically linked to the verb 'to run'.<sup>9</sup> Writing in the fifth century BCE, Thucydides claimed that the Peloponnesian War was caused by Sparta's fear, or *phobos*, of Athens's growing power.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the word *ekplexis* denoted terrified astonishment. Finally, panic, or *phobos panikos*, was associated with the half-goat and half-human god Pan, a deity of the Arcadian woods and mountains, whose scream was said to spark panic in all who heard it.<sup>11</sup>

In early imperial China, between the fourth century BCE and the third century CE, fear of the gods shaped the conventions that governed social relations, status and class. Fear at the prospect of divine retribution for a transgression acted as a form of social control and a check on destabilising worldly ambitions, whether from refractory subjects or rulers tempted to overreach the accepted limits of their power.<sup>12</sup>

Let's be clear, then. It's not as if humans suddenly developed a new propensity for fear and an awareness of its uses in fourteenth-century western Europe. So what happened in the fourteenth century that changed the nature of fear? The short answer is that a series of catastrophic events primed western Europe for profound social and political transformations,

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which a century and a half later would lead to the globalisation of fear. Reeling from the impact of famine and pandemic, the unity of the Catholic Church was challenged and then fragmented amid the bloodshed of religious and political conflict. A politics of fear that had been honed in war-torn Europe was mobilised to subdue the Americas, Asia and Africa. This exportation of Western fear was central to the making of the modern world.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting *The Triumph of Death* offers clues about the nature of these transformations. Completed in the early 1560s, it depicts a legion of skeletons slaughtering the living and herding them through what appears to be a trapdoor to Hell. In the foreground, Death rides a skeletal mare and wields a scythe. An infernal landscape stretches into the horizon, devoid of vegetation and scarred by violence; victims hang from dead trees or are wracked on torture wheels; fires smoulder, and smoke drifts towards a shipwreck-littered coastline.

What's striking is the intensity and authenticity of the emotional world Bruegel conjures. We can hear the blood-curdling screams of these men and women, and feel their desperation to escape. Panic is visceral and sudden, a spontaneous response to the fear of excruciating pain and death, as well as the prospect of divine judgement. The crowd scenes are made up of numerous vignettes that focus on individual fears, whether a king's fear of losing his power or a parent's fear of losing her child. In effect, Bruegel provides a sixteenth-century anatomy of fear, breaking it down for us in a world that's being torn apart. Death, the great equaliser, has reduced the king to the level of a scavenging dog. The painting shows us human fallibility and the terror of God's retribution, but it also gives us an urgently contemporary perspective on mass violence.

In Bruegel's homeland, the Low Countries, fear was ever-present in the 1560s, as Philip II of Spain, who'd inherited the territory from his father, the Habsburg emperor Charles V,

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cracked down on his Protestant subjects. The violence of the Inquisition would lead to full-blown war from 1568, rumbling on until Spain's grudging recognition of the Dutch Republic in 1648. Godevaert van Haecht, an artisan from Antwerp, recorded how people panic-bought weapons to defend their homes; the word 'fear' pervades his chronicle for the years between 1565 and 1574.<sup>13</sup> Here we have, in other words, two integral fears: fear of God and fear that comes with the suppression of freedom and faith. Added to this are the terrifying spectres of plague and famine that stalked sixteenth-century Europe.

To get a measure of the scale of upheaval shown in Bruegel's hellscape, it's worth comparing it to another, earlier depiction of the world: the lavishly illustrated vellum prayer book known as the *Très Riches Heures*, probably begun around 1412 by Paul, Herman and Jean Limbourg for the Duc de Berry, son of the king of France. Consisting of 206 pages, with numerous miniature paintings, the book is a devotional guide organised around prescribed periods of daily prayer. The manuscript contains readings from the Gospels, prayers to the Virgin, psalms and a calendar of liturgical days. At the front there's a twelve-scene cycle known as the 'Labours of the Months', which depicts the changing seasons and associated activities: peasants toiling on the land and aristocrats going about their business against a vista of medieval castles and grand interiors. Arching above these everyday scenes are the Heavens, painted in brilliant blue lapis lazuli with golden zodiac signs.

In contrast to the chaos of Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death*, this is a hierarchical world depicted as profoundly ordered and locked in a single, universal time. There's no overt fear or panic in this divinely ordained universe. Take the depiction of the month of October. Only the presence of a scarecrow with a bow and arrow and the looming castle in the background suggest that social cohesion is ensured by the ubiquitous threat of force. Here we have an ideal, pyramidal social system with God at the pinnacle and, working down from the king, the nobles,

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knights, freemen, villeins – feudal tenants – and serfs. It's an intricate edifice knitted together by reciprocal obligations, by rights bestowed in return for oaths of fealty and service in kind.

As the art critic Erwin Panofsky suggested, the sumptuous illustrations in the *Très Riches Heures* may reflect an attempt to reassert social distinctions at a time when 'the ruling class of an aging society' was threatened by competition from 'younger forces rising against it'.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, something clearly happened between 1412 and 1562 that replaced the idealised view of the Duc de Berry's prayer book with the spectacle of fear and panic so vividly dramatised in Bruegel's painting. It's not that fear and panic were suddenly invented; it's just that by the mid-sixteenth century they had acquired a new visibility in everyday life.

The Reformation and the break-up of Christendom changed how fear was understood, providing lessons for how it might be exploited as the basis for new institutions of belief and novel forms of centralised power. But before we turn to the causes and consequences of these transformations, we should rewind to a time before disaster struck. What place did fear have in this world?

The great Gothic cathedrals of the twelfth, thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries dominated the medieval landscape. These buildings weren't just professions of faith; they were emblems of wealth, ingenuity and confidence. Among the many innovations of the thirteenth century were the mechanical clock, new methods of glassmaking and the spread of paper-mill technology, which had been introduced into southern Europe from the Arab world in the twelfth century. Banking boomed with trade and industry, and Italian cities emerged as hubs of international finance. Many of the great universities were founded and thrived as intellectual centres, such as those in Cambridge, Coimbra, Montpellier, Padua, Salamanca, Siena and Valladolid. All of this was powered by economic expansion. As populations

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grew, the extraction of natural resources intensified, from mining to the felling of forests for timber and large-scale land clearance for farming. Some historians speak of an 'agricultural revolution', suggesting that technological breakthroughs had transformational effects and led to a steep rise in productivity. Among them was the introduction of the heavy-wheeled ploughshare, which saved labour and enabled the cultivation of fertile land in northern Europe, whose dense, unyielding clay soils had previously been difficult to till.<sup>15</sup>

Prosperity didn't put an end to fear, which remained a feature of life. People feared famine, disease, war, Satan and his minions, the wrath of God, the apocalypse and damnation.<sup>16</sup> Fear hovered in the corners of the everyday, like demons in the marginalia of illuminated manuscripts. In the fourteenth-century compilation of devotional texts known as *The Neville of Hornby Hours*, fallen angels are shown as horned creatures with cloven hooves tumbling downwards towards Hell. The demons depicted have all the animal characteristics of the Greek goat god Pan, who was progressively demonised in the post-classical period. It wasn't only his appearance – hooves, tail and horns – but his violent desires, unbridled sexuality and musical passions. Like Pan, the Devil tempts humans to sin, estranging them from their true nature and inducing manic behaviour – in a word, panic.<sup>17</sup>

Fear was linked to the unknown, and monsters tended to congregate on the shadowy outlands of the world. In *The Visions of the Knight Tondal*, a popular twelfth-century tale, a knight encounters an assortment of ghoulish monsters as he travels through Hell to Paradise, guided by an angel. The sole surviving illuminated copy of the text, in the collection of the Getty Museum, depicts tortured sinners writhing in agony inside the fiery maw of Hell, which is kept ajar by two demonic giants.

The best-known trek through the underworld, however, occurs in the *Divine Comedy*, completed in 1320. Having woken to find himself lost in the middle of a dark wood, the poet Dante

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spies a sunlit hill ahead and his terror subsides: but not for long, because soon his path is blocked by a leopard, lion and ferocious she-wolf that force him back, 'all tears and attrition', into the darkness. So begins a descent into the Inferno that turns out to be a journey through fear, which both shatters any lingering complacency and reaffirms God's omniscience.<sup>18</sup>

Fear isn't just a literary theme, and neither are these diabolical monsters always allegorical abstractions. It was thought that satanic agents saturated the physical world, communicating through birdsong and leaving menacing signs of their presence for those who could decipher them. One thirteenth-century Cistercian abbot claimed that people were surrounded by swarms of invisible demons that floated in the air like motes of dust.<sup>19</sup>

Church doctrine and ritual nurtured and directed this fear, recruiting it to the cause of faith, while countering despair with assurances of an afterlife and hope of redemption. In his influential *Summa Theologiae*, written between 1266 and 1273, the theologian Thomas Aquinas considers the objects, causes and effects of fear. He asks whether fear is necessarily evil and answers that, because it is 'natural to man' and a fundamental condition of being human, it isn't intrinsically good or bad. 'Now fear is born of love,' he reflects, citing St Augustine, 'since man fears the loss of what he loves.' Fearlessness, Aquinas suggests, ought to be regarded as a vice since fear of God is a prerequisite for loving Him: 'God can and ought to be feared.'<sup>20</sup>

Fear had other benefits; it could awaken sinners to God's grace and act as a deterrent against propensities for evil.<sup>21</sup> In his treatise *On Morals*, the theologian William of Auvergne, bishop of Paris from 1228 to 1249, reflects on the nine virtues – Faith, Fear, Hope, Charity, Piety, Zeal, Poverty, Humility and Patience – which are personified and given a platform to persuade the reader of their value. 'I am the doorkeeper and guardian of the human heart,' proclaims Fear, who like all the other virtues is portrayed as a woman. Fear is a motivator, protector and torturer;

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she is a scarecrow to keep away 'the birds of flighty, vain, impure, and harmful thoughts', a balm to heal 'the wounds of carnal and worldly desires', and a schoolteacher who is cruel to be kind, using Hell as a rod to teach and chastise God's children.<sup>22</sup>

Material power underpinned the Church's spiritual influence, and in the late twelfth century it hit on the idea of trading fear for profit by granting full or partial remission of sin with the cash payment of an indulgence. If you had the means, you could reduce the time you'd have to spend in Purgatory. But the Church also used fear, intimidation and outright force to eliminate dissent. Christian sects who challenged orthodoxies, such as the Cathars and Waldensians in southern France, were branded heretics who were in league with Satan and brutally suppressed. 'Human life is constant fear,' declared Innocent III, the most formidable of medieval popes and the architect of the twenty-year campaign against the Cathars, as well as the sponsor of the disastrous Fourth Crusade, which set out to seize Jerusalem from its Muslim rulers in 1202 but ended up further dividing Christendom.<sup>23</sup>

Then came the first of two major disasters. Between 1315 and 1322 famine ravaged the continent, killing up to 10 per cent of the urban population in northern Europe, and far more in some areas.<sup>24</sup> People panicked when hunger was compounded by sickness. According to one witness, 'the bodies of paupers, dead of starvation, littered the streets', and the stink of decay was overpowering.<sup>25</sup> Contemporaneous accounts describe people hoarding what food they could find, foraging for roots and nuts, and eating wild grasses and bark to survive. The more sensationalist reports describe people devouring horses and dogs, feeding on the carcasses of dead cattle and bird shit. Chroniclers provide anecdotal evidence of infanticide and cannibalism. Prisoners purportedly ate their fellow inmates in jail; parents and children consumed each other. Criminals were seized from the gallows and corpses exhumed from cemeteries. Inequality

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increased and crime exploded: extortion, robbery, assault and murder.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, death, sin and redemption loom large as themes in devotional art at this time. *The Triumph of Death*, a fresco in the Campo Santo, the cemetery building beside Pisa Cathedral, is thought to have been painted in the 1330s. Fear is at the core of this vast mural comprised of numerous chilling scenes, including one showing three open caskets with snakes writhing over decomposing bodies. Although the fresco suggests social resilience – the show goes on despite the calamity – it also depicts a society overwhelmed by death. While a group of noblewomen make music in a peaceful grove, a terrifying white-haired witch hurtles towards them with a scythe. This may well be the depiction of a society reeling from the impact of famine, but what's certain is that across much of western Europe famine aggravated social tensions and exposed new stress points. The consequences were to become evident a decade later, when a second catastrophe struck: plague.

By late 1346 reports had begun to reach Christendom of a devastating disease in the East. It was said that earthquakes, tempests, hail, fire and brimstones presaged the contagion. Venomous beasts – serpents, scorpions and 'pestilential worms' – had fallen from the sky.<sup>27</sup> Gabriel de Mussis, a notary from Piacenza in northern Italy, claimed that Mongol soldiers besieging the Genoese port city of Caffa (present-day Feodosia) on the Black Sea had catapulted infected corpses over the walls in an act of biological warfare. In October 1347 twelve Genoese galleys landed at Messina in Sicily, bringing the disease with them from Crimea.<sup>28</sup>

Although there is little direct evidence that rodents were implicated in the plague's spread, it's long been thought that infection spread via rats – hosts of the plague flea – that fed off the grain stored in the holds, or from flea-infected bales of cloth and fur pelts traded by the Genoese. While some historians

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have noted striking epidemiological differences between the fourteenth-century plague and the rat-borne plague pandemic of the late nineteenth century, recent scientific research, including genetic corroboration from a fourteenth-century burial pit in London's East Smithfield, has confirmed that the disease was bubonic plague caused by the *Yersinia pestis* bacterium.<sup>29</sup> It's likely that the plague spread through Central Eurasia with the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century and that the outbreaks in the following century were the result of spillover events from these new plague reservoirs.<sup>30</sup>

So lethal was the plague, claimed the Sicilian chronicler Michele da Piazza, that anyone who came into fleeting contact with infected persons or their belongings was doomed. The inhabitants of Messina decamped to the countryside, expanding the circle of infection further.<sup>31</sup> 'The plague frightened and killed,' wrote the Arab historian Ibn al-Wardi, a first-hand witness to the widespread panic triggered by the plague's arrival in the Middle East, including the devastation of his home city, Aleppo, in 1348.<sup>32</sup> The poet Petrarch lamented that the plague 'trampled and destroyed the entire world'. 'Everywhere we see sorrow, on all sides we see terror,' he wrote. How would future generations comprehend what it was like to live at a time when 'dwellings were emptied, cities abandoned', and bodies dumped unceremoniously in fields? Petrarch worried too about the fate of those he loved. 'Free me from these fears as soon as possible by a letter from you, my dear brother, if you still live,' he enjoined his Flemish friend Lodewijk Heyligen. His patron, Cardinal Giovanni Colonna, succumbed to the disease, while his brother Gerardo, a Carthusian monk, was the sole survivor of his monastery in the south of France.<sup>33</sup>

The most famous description of the plague occurs in the introduction to Giovanni Boccaccio's collection of stories *The Decameron*, begun around 1349 and completed by 1353. A former banker and lawyer, Boccaccio was a thirty-four-year-old bachelor living in Florence when the epidemic struck. He tells us that

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over a few months 100,000 people perished, a figure that may not be far off the mark. The pestilence, he writes, 'was spread by the slightest contact between the sick and the healthy just as a fire will catch dry or oily materials when they are placed right beside it'. Plague victims – and Boccaccio's father and stepmother were among them – apparently woke up 'perfectly healthy, dined in the morning with their families, companions, and friends, only to have supper that evening with their ancestors in the next world'.<sup>34</sup>

All such accounts need to be treated with circumspection and in some cases outright scepticism. When the Sieneze chronicler Agnolo di Tura tells us that people thought it was the end of the world and that he buried five of his own children, should we take him at face value?<sup>35</sup> Read side by side, many accounts sound indistinguishable. Boccaccio's description of the plague is indebted to Thucydides and functions as a literary framing device for the subsequent tales. Petrarch's letters, for all their pathos, were hardly spontaneous outpourings but carefully crafted literary works modelled on the letters of the Roman philosopher Cicero. The issue of literary indebtedness raises the question of how real the fear and panic really were. Are the descriptions of social collapse and mass hysteria overblown? After all, the chroniclers reporting on the plague are in many cases the same ones who would have us believe that toads fell from the Heavens as portents of the disaster.

An analysis of last wills and testaments in Bologna in 1348 suggests that social ties proved resilient and trust didn't vanish overnight. Even at the peak of the crisis, family, friends and neighbours were witnessing the wills of plague victims.<sup>36</sup> But how reliable are these records? The historian Samuel Cohn has pointed out that they account for only 5 per cent of those who died of the plague in that year. What happened to all the others? Were people dying too fast to prepare for their end?<sup>37</sup> It seems disingenuous to play down the magnitude of a pandemic that contemporaries described as 'The Great Pestilence' or 'The

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Great Mortality', and which much later came to be known as the 'Black Death' – a disaster that may have wiped out half of Europe in just three years.

Looking back from the 1380s, the Florentine chronicler Baldassarre Bonaiuti describes how the dead were thrown into large communal pits, with hundreds of bodies stacked on top of one another, separated by a shallow covering of earth, 'just as one makes lasagne with layers of pasta and cheese'.<sup>38</sup> In a conservative estimate, 25 million people died between 1347 and 1351, but the figure may have been much higher, perhaps double this number. In some parts of the western Mediterranean as many as 60 per cent or more of the population may have perished, and it would take well over a century for population levels to recover.<sup>39</sup>

In the earliest known medical tract on the plague, written in April 1348, weeks before the pandemic reached his home town of Lleida in western Catalonia, the physician Jacme d'Agramont compared the destructive nature of plague fear to the terror caused by an approaching fire. 'Everyday experience,' he observed, 'shows us that when a dwelling catches on fire all the neighbors become afraid, and the nearer they live, the more frightened they become.' D'Agramont's purpose in writing was to allay some of the 'doubts and fears' caused by the impending contagion.<sup>40</sup>

Although the effects and responses to the plague varied greatly across Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia, the scale of mortality created political, economic and psychological shocks that would irrevocably change western Europe. 'The fear was such that nobody knew what to do,' one chronicler reported.<sup>41</sup> Fear, untethered from conventional religious observance, unleashed a powerful destabilising force that affected every aspect of life. The French historian Jean Delumeau has claimed that the plague, among other psychological shocks, produced 'morbid fantasies' that contributed to the rise of a collective European insecurity, which was to last until

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the eighteenth century. In this pessimistic mindset, obsessed with guilt and shame, dangers were seen to lurk everywhere.<sup>42</sup>

While some historians have questioned the plague's long-term effects, it is generally agreed that the pandemic's first wave in Europe triggered 'wild and unsanctioned displays of emotion'.<sup>43</sup> First and foremost, fear of the deadly disease prompted flight from infected cities and towns, particularly in urbanised regions such as central and northern Italy. Even though some municipal authorities attempted to prevent people from leaving their homes by imposing fines or placing guards at city gates, many sought to escape. Echoing the description of the Great Plague of Athens in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Boccaccio tells us that 'respect for the reverend authority of the laws, both divine and human', evaporated. When citizens stepped in to help bury their dead neighbours, they did so not out of charity but because they feared catching the disease. In *The Decameron* a group of seven young women and three young men flee from plague-infested, crime-riven Florence to spend a fortnight in the countryside. The spectacle of so much death and destruction, not to mention the ever-present stench of decay, 'caused all sorts of fears and fantasies in those who remained alive'. The poor weren't so lucky, according to Boccaccio; left without help, they died 'more like animals than human beings'.<sup>44</sup>

The mystery of the disease's origins and the distinctive 'buboes', or swollen lymph glands that accompanied infection, amplified those fears. What caused the disease? No one knew. The medical faculty of the University of Paris prepared a report for King Philip VI of France in which the pandemic was attributed to astrological influences: a celestial constellation had precipitated noxious vapours. To ward off this poisonous miasma, the report advised staying away from fetid marshland and any place with stagnant water; it also recommended fumigations to purify the air with agarwood or, for those rich enough to afford them, amber resin and musk.<sup>45</sup>