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# Knowledge, democracy and the politics of (cyber)fear

## KNOWLEDGE, DEMOCRACY AND THE POLITICS OF (CYBER)FEAR

The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic has re-actualized the old idea that fear is inherent to the human condition and in some measure necessary for the preservation of political order. In political communication, the politics of fear is a notion describing a particular strategy, usually associated with the promotion of conservative or right-wing ideas and ideologies. In this strategy, one or more political actors seeks to increase their political influence through the communicative manipulation of relations of meaning associated to fear in society. Amplified by the media, this strategy can have deep transformative effects on politics and society, contributing, for example, to the radicalization of identity politics in ways that seems to have become increasingly influential in the 21st century. The main point of this paper is that the critical engagement with (cyber)fear requires the opening up of the epistemic dimension of the politics of (cyber)fear. The political role of fear and its impact on freedom, security and democracy is mediated by the role of the epistemic regimes, including their ideological aspects associated with the production of authoritative knowledge in society. In this perspective, the politics of (cyber)fear can be conceptualized as a strategy for the suppression of the radical potential of new technologies. The repressive effects of this strategy can be resisted through the development of critical knowledge and the support of critical epistemic competence in education.

**KEYWORDS** *Cyberfear, Politics of Fear, Freedom & Security, Democracy, Neoliberalism.*

## 1. Introduction

Fear is a powerful emotion that associates with politics in ambivalent ways. If we follow the classic idea that politics is the competition for the control over the distribution of values in society (Lasswell 1950 [1936]; Easton 1965), the politics of fear can be usefully conceptualized as the competition for the control over the distribution of values in society through the control of fear – or, for short, the competition for the control over fear.

Many authors have criticised the politics of fear on the grounds of its reactionary and repressive effects on democratic politics such as the reshaping

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of the distribution of power to the advantage of decision-making elites through «securitization» (Wæver 1995), ideological homogenization (Stocchetti 2007), the intolerant and abusive managing of otherness (Nussbaum 2012; Wodak 2015; Pates and Leser 2021), etc. Perhaps less obviously, however, the politics of fear can be used as deterrence: to deter people from taking the risk of emancipation by increasing the price of freedom.

The core issue in the analysis of political fear is the ambivalent relation between fear, freedom and knowledge. The classic myth about Eve and Adam offers a useful way to approach this relationship also in relation to cyberfear as fear was the first emotion experienced by our ancestors once they ate the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. The usual reading of that myth suggests we must obey authority or accept terrible punishment. A more critical reading, however, suggests that, among humans, curiosity is stronger than fear and curiosity about issues of knowledge and moral knowledge in particular, makes us free and master of our own destiny, albeit with a terrible price. The knowledge of pain and death is the price imposed on freedom and emancipation by a master whose authority is based on fear.

Throughout the modern era, the age of Enlightenment and even in the «postmodern condition», the ambivalent lesson of that myth about the trade-off between freedom and security keeps haunting intellectual and political debates. Notions such as the «dialectics of Enlightenment» (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1947]), the «fear of/escape from freedom» (Fromm 2003 [1942]), the idea that «too much democracy is bad for democracy» (Crozier *et al.* 1975) and the disenchantment about the very myths of modernity that supports the possibility of scientific truth as the grounds for political legitimacy and reality itself (Lyotard 1982 [1979]; Bauman 2006) are landmarks of a journey that, according to the myth, started when our ancestors were banned from the Earthly Heaven. Perhaps what keeps us going is the secular effort to make sense of what happened after Eve ate the apple: why the price of freedom is fear?

This is the background for the arguments about the politics of (cyber) fear I will discuss in the rest of this text. This background is important because it sets the stage for issues that have deep roots in the history of humankind. It is necessary to understand why «innovative solutions» in technological development and elsewhere, cannot credibly be treated as having a life on their own but rather as more or less ephemeral solutions to deeper, more pressing and much older problems. Indeed, so old that we may have lost the capacity to remember them in their original formulation: in the way these problems presented themselves at the beginning of our history.

My discussion of cyberfear relies on a broader argument about the human experience of fear that I can only summarize here. The key idea is that fear

– and especially the fear of death – is the fundamental problem feeding the quest for knowledge that leads to both solutions and new versions of the same problem. As the fear of death is too hard to handle, we deal with the fear of starvation, of enemies, of the unpleasantness of the weather, illness or aging. We create the social world to deal with these, but even this world soon becomes a source of fear in itself. If the appeal of the cyberspace consists in the utopian belief of a world deprived of fear, the root cause of cyberfear is the dystopia of new and unfathomable fears. The old dilemma involving freedom, fear and knowledge presents itself again, this time in a world of our making.

The politics of (cyber)fear is a useful concept to describe a strategy for the control of fear. Key in this strategy is the effort to suppress those forms of knowledge that question the trade-off between freedom and security, and challenge the epistemic order supporting established relations of power.

To anticipate the main conclusion of my analysis, my suggestion is «to eat more apples» and to open up the epistemic dimension of fear, of cyberfear and its politics. The politics of (cyber)fear can be dissolved through the mediation of critical knowledge. This mediation is useful and perhaps necessary to neutralize the effects of fear but also, and more radically, to identify and deal with the forces in position to instrumentalize fear and determine the price of freedom.

## 2. About fear and politics

Simplifying a debate that is impossible to accurately describe here, the political role of fear is usually interpreted through the conceptual lenses of at least two traditions. In the oldest tradition, fear is an inescapable emotion associated with the human condition and a necessary pillar of any political order, including democratic regimes. In the second tradition, fear is an emotion associated to circumstances that human reason can successfully tackle and, in politics, a signature of non-democratic regimes. Despite the differences, both these traditions interpret fear in relation to the (legitimate or illegitimate) exercise of power on the assumption that these relations are constitutive of the social order. My interpretation of the political role of fear assumes that, in addition to relations of power, socio-political orders rely on epistemic regimes or distinctive ways of organizing the production of authoritative knowledge (Jasanoff 2004; Mazzotti 2008). In my interpretation the relationship between fear and politics is mediated by the role of knowledge, and the ambivalence of fear in relation to the legitimate or illegitimate exercise of political power is dissolved if one introduces the epistemic dimension of this relation in the picture.

For the purposes of my argument, the provocative essay «in defence of fear» by Degerman, Flinders and Johnson (Degerman *et al.* 2020) offers a good description of these the two traditions and the grounds for my critique. The main point of that text is that the Covid pandemic provides grounds to re-evaluate the role of fear as a useful emotion in politics. The authors ground their critique of the mainstream tradition «against fear» (Bader *et al.* 2020; Furedi 2018; Nussbaum 2018; Bauman 2006; Arendt 2017; Ahmed 2003), on the ideas of Hobbes as actualized in Shklar (1989) but especially on the works of Gray (1997; 2000; 2002 [1998]; 2002; 2004; 2003). The idea that political fear is toxic for democracy and unnecessary for political cohesion is challenged on the grounds that, although it can be instrumentalized for political purposes, fear is an adaptive emotional response that facilitates survival: not an emotion to efface or suppress but rather a «natural and beneficial» response to deal with situations like the Covid pandemic (Degerman *et al.* 2020, 4). Although «fear itself can be a tool of oppressive social control for governments, [...] some degree of fear is unavoidable in human life and [...] any legal system implies minimal levels of fear' in order to incentivize compliance» (Shklar quoted in Degerman *et al.* 2020, 2).

The authors argued a number of interesting points. Discussing the rationality of fear, for example, «the question should not be whether or not fear is rational, but how to develop policy grounded in rational deployment of the emotion when threat emerges» (Degerman *et al.* 2020, 8). Contra Bauman, arguing that fear results from ignorance (Bauman 2006), they argue that «it is a striking feature of the current crisis that many of our fears are not fuelled by ignorance but by knowledge» (Degerman *et al.* 2020, 9). The notion of «insufficient fear» is deployed as an alternative to socio-economic disparities in the explanation of inequalities in mortality rates (Degerman *et al.* 2020, 11) and to argue that «a lack of fear seemingly forms part of the problem» (Degerman *et al.* 2020, 12). Despite acknowledging that pandemic fear had a negative impact on «people's already tenuous trust in democratic institutions and processes». (Degerman *et al.* 2020, 15) and «has undoubtedly curtailed freedom in significant and, perhaps, necessary ways» (Degerman *et al.* 2020, 16), the authors interpret the effects of fear as an opportunity «...for liberal-democratic governments to harness the potential for renewal presented by fear through reform to address the expanding clusters of crises without continuing the slide toward autocracy. This depends on fostering predictability» (Degerman *et al.* 2020, 15).

The idea that political fear can bring about the renewal of the political community was already criticized, among others, by Robin (2004) in the aftermath of 9/11. The idea that the slide towards autocracy can be avoided by

«fostering predictability» sounds a bit odd and dangerous to the extent that predictability requires control and supports the «surveillance capitalism» that as Zuboff (2019) argued, is one of the greatest threats to contemporary democracies.

A point that is important for our discussion but is somehow neglected in this «defence of fear» is that old and new interpretations of the political role of fear are based on different ideological and epistemic grounds. Epistemology and ideology are separate worlds only for analytical purposes. In the practices of our daily lives, the two are so closely intertwined that analytical distinctions require very complex arguments. Without these arguments, it is virtually impossible to distinguish where one ends and the other begins as each influence the other and together they constitute what we call reality. Too narrow a focus on fear in the constitution of socio-political order neglects the role of knowledge for example in the experience and tackling of fear, and in the constitution of trust between the people and their rulers. To understand the relation between fear and socio-political order, in other words, the key relation is not that between fear and politics but rather that between fear, knowledge and the politics resulting from the epistemic mediation of fear. To look at this mediation and the epistemic dimension of fear is crucially important to appreciate what is unique in the relationship between fear and politics in democratic regimes.

For example, the idea about the natural origins of fear in Hobbes is more ambivalent than commonly believed. Quoting some unknown «old Poets», Hobbes suggested, «the Gods were first created by humane Feare» (Hobbes 2003 [1996] [1651], 76). As is well known, for Hobbes fear is necessary to social order since «where there were no common Power to feare [...] men that have formerly lived under a peacefull government, use to degenerate into, in a civill Warre» (*Ibidem*). What is perhaps less noticed in these famous quotes is the paradoxical idea that human fear is both the origin and the effects of the «common Power to feare». This state of affairs is taken for granted by another classic: Machiavelli's Prince. As Grint argued, Machiavelli precepts are meant to apply to «the world of politics as it was» and not «as it should be in some mystical and unachievable utopia» (Grint 2011, 6). As the idea of representative democracy was utopia in the time of Machiavelli, one may argue his interpretation of the political role of fear was reasonable and even morally acceptable if one assumes that «to protect the interests of a community a prince has to do whatever is necessary – for the greater good» (Grint 2011, 7). The French Revolution, however, made it clear that fear between the Prince and his sujets could go both ways. In the political theory of Machiavelli and Hobbes, fear is not removed but just deployed in support of the maintenance of political order. The important difference between these conceptualizations

and the tradition of democratic politics consists in the possibility of bringing about the conditions for a fundamental change and the elimination of fear, not from human existence but at least from political competition.

The key difference between the old and new traditions is ultimately about the (im)possibility of changes to emancipate the social world from the influence of the state of nature and the fears associated with it. In epistemic terms, this is the fundamental difference between a behaviorist and a constructionist approach to the problem of political fear. In political terms, this is the fundamental difference between the competing projects of non-democratic and democratic regimes: whereas in the former fear is instrumental to the preservation of political order, a fundamental point in the legitimization of democratic authority is the protection against political fear.

Rather than taking seriously the alleged natural grounds of political fear I prefer to rely on a myth of the beginning and revise the linkage between fear, knowledge and politics through a revision of the myth of Eve and Adam. As Robin argued, «fear is the first emotion experienced by a character in the Bible. Not desire, not shame, but fear» (Robin 2004, 1). Fear of what? Fear of a yet unknown punishment deserved for violating God's prohibition to eat the apple from the tree of Knowledge of Good & Evil. If we follow the authors of the Bible, the experience of fear is an effect induced by the human acquisition of moral knowledge: a very ambivalent knowledge that triggers guilt, shame and eventually fear of punishment but also, as Freud (2005 [1930]) suggested, the beginning of human civilization. If fear is experienced as the price of freedom and if the acquisition of knowledge (through the eating of the apple) is the process that triggers both, we are left with the paradox that knowledge is both part of the problem and the solution. It is what leads to fear, ultimately via the awareness of death, and what may bring emancipation from fear through reason and the possibility of collective action associated with the social order. But if the social order is also preserved through fear, the role of knowledge in relation to fear and the constitution of social order is ambivalent.

The idea of this ambivalence resonates, albeit in different forms, with the dramatic message of the «dialectics of the Enlightenment» and the critical interpretations of social theory and instrumental reason (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1947]). Simplified to the extreme, the core of this message is that the liberation from the fears of superstitions through instrumental reason has come with a price: the fear of that nothingness left by the awareness that the world of humans has no meaning in itself. Politics alone cannot handle that fear but, as Fromm aptly described (Fromm 2003 [1942]), politics itself is vulnerable to its effects as the «escape from freedom' leads to totalitarian rule».

One may even accept, in line with the old tradition, the idea that the experience of fear does not belong primarily to the sphere of the political, although some fears can be resolved or exacerbated there, but to the deeper sphere of human experience of life in the natural as well as the social environments. But limiting the discussion of fear to the sphere of the political, rather than to the broader sphere of human experience, and leaving out the transformative role of knowledge, implies some misunderstanding and, more practically, a fundamental attribution error.

The Hobbesian and Machiavellian suggestion to handle the existential fear of human condition through the fear of the coercive power for the rulers, rather than through transformative knowledge, established the rationale for the executions of tyrants in the English, French and perhaps Russian revolutions, among others. Those executions however, removed tyrants and brought about, not freedom from fear, but only «freedom» from particular solutions that had lost their efficacy. Replacing the power/fear of the king with the deadly trap of instrumental reason, re-constituted fear in a new and in many respects more formidable form: the fear of reason turned against itself (Horkheimer 1993). No wonder the postmodernist critique of knowledge produced more concerns than emancipation (Callinicos 1989).

The relocation of fear from the sphere of knowledge to that of the competition for power is a precondition for the politics of fear: a strategy for the «rational deployment» of fear in the competition for the control over the distribution of values in society. While the idea that fear plays a key political role is old (Mulholland 2012), the «politics of fear» is a rather recent notion that became prominent in the study of political fear after the terroristic events of September 11, 2001 (Prewitt 2004; Gore 2004; Thrall and Cramer 2009). Since then, it has been applied to more and more recent crises such as the Covid pandemic (Siegel 2020) religious intolerance (Nussbaum 2012), the rise of extreme right-wing movements (Wodak 2015; Pates and Leser 2021) and the fundamental role of the media as the agents enabling the politics of fear (Altheide 2006; Ribeiro and Schwarzenegger 2021). In essence, this notion describes a strategy deployed to influence relations of power through the manipulation of fear. This strategy, however, is toxic for democracy because it forces people to choose between freedom and security, imposing structural insecurity as the price of freedom. In our age, the production of insecurity through the politics of fear is not a feature unique to the totalitarian but the distinctive way Neoliberalism works to dismantle the «institutions of protection» in Western democracies and ultimately to undermine democracy itself as a response to political fear (Lazzarato 2009, 128).

The challenge, then, is not to deploy fear to renew the social contract but to deploy forms of knowledge that can effectively challenge the influence of an oppressive ideology and its epistemology. And as the more experienced reader may recall, this is the same challenge that inspired the distinction between critical and traditional theory in relation to the possibility and direction of social change (Horkheimer 2002 [1968]). The same distinction is perhaps useful for other purposes and, for example, to distinguish between the politics of fear as a reactionary strategy of political communication from the communicative strategies to tackle frightening situations. Whereas knowledge can be used to instrumentalize the fear associated with crisis such as pandemics, wars, or social conflicts, critical knowledge is the knowledge necessary to question the terms of the tradeoff that the politics of fear establishes between freedom and security.

The epistemic assumption here is that there are no intrinsic or natural reasons why knowledge, freedom and security cannot go hand in hand in our efforts to deal with fear both privately and collectively. In a democratic perspective, the role of critical knowledge is relevant to challenge the legitimacy of solutions enforced through the politics of fear and the terms of political formulas that construe freedom as the price of security and vice versa. The cultivation of fear to enforce the idea that security is more important than freedom is an interpretation of this relationship associated with reactionary ideologies and oppressive political regimes. Rather than accepting this trade off, we can challenge its terms. As I will argue in the last section, this is possible if we reintroduce knowledge – and especially critical knowledge - in the equation, opening up the epistemic dimension of the politics of (cyber) fear.

If the politics of fear is a strategy for the control of relations of meaning inspired by the competition for the control over relations of power, what is the meaning of notions such as «cyberfear» and «politics of cyberfear»? And what can be done to oppose their oppressive effects in political communication?

### 3. Cyberspace & fear

The cyberspace is an ambivalent space for at least two reasons. First, because the notion includes a variety of disparate material and immaterial, natural and social objects relating to the development of information and communication technologies, around the Seventies. Second, because, among the variety of communicative uses of this notion, the most interesting one, for our purposes, relates not to its referents but to the implicit narrative that comprehend and organize them: not to the cyberspace but to the myth of the cyberspace. As other myth, also this one performs ideological functions. Core among these is

the naturalization of technological determinism and the utopia of the elimination of socio-political conflicts through technological solutions.

A part from a brief appearance in the late Sixties, the term cyberspace itself was established in the Eighties literary fiction by William Gibson, in his two novels, *Burning Chrome* and *The Neuromancer*, as an original background to stories about the archaic dialectics of love and death. It was then taken seriously, so to say, by people who had little interest in these dialectics and thus moved from the realm of imagination and the cultural domain of cyberpunk, to «visionary» engineering (Hafner and Lyon 1996). Whereas literary fiction is a good place for encounters with fears, in engineering these encounters are usually avoided, repressed, sublimated.

Today the cyberspace is a space of paradoxes, contradictions and tensions whose existence depends on a complex mix of technological conditions and social conventions. In common parlance, we usually talk about the cyberspace as a natural space, with a life of its own and autonomous from human control even if it is anything but natural nor independent. Like most other technologies, once put into existence by a combination of epistemic, technological and financial resources, it has made itself indispensable. And like other technologies, the tool controls the people far more than the people control the tool. In a critical perspective, these paradoxes, contradictions and tensions suggest that cyberspace is a space of contention: one among other social infrastructures where the competition between antagonistic social forces takes place. The influence of the myth of the cyberspace, however, play a key role in hiding these tensions and the conflicts associated with them.

As Mosco argued in an influential analysis, the myth of the cyberspace is a useful place to look in order to understand the nature of social contradictions, irresoluble conflicts and «problems that are overwhelmingly intractable» (Mosco 2004, 14), because myths are tools to deal «with the contradictions of social life that can never be fully resolved» (Mosco 2004, 28) and forms of «depoliticised speech» that «purify social relations by eliminating the tensions and conflicts that animate the political life of a community» (Mosco 2004, 31).

Applying the analyses of Lévi-Strauss (2001 [1978]; 1987) and Barthes (2000 [1957]), to the myth of the cyberspace, Mosco (2004, 156) argued that: «From a cultural or mythical perspective, cyberspace may be seen as the end of history, geography and politics. But from a political economic perspective, cyberspace results from the mutual constitution of digitization and commodification. Digitization expands the commodification of content by extending opportunities to measure and monitor, package and repackage entertainment and information».

This tension between the myth and the political-economy of the processes it describes is crucial for understanding the nature of cyber-fear and the functions of the politics of cyber-fear. In this interpretation, the myth of the cyberspace is the story designed to make sense of digitization and its disruptive effects in ways to hide the influence of the ideology and the interests of the social forces promoting it. The denial of history and politics, the regeneration in the cyberspace of the communitarian ideals that Neoliberalism seeks to destroy in the real world (Bourdieu 1998), the idea of the cyberspace as «repository of the future» (Mosco 2004, 15), and the morbid fascination with the idea that a «cyberlife», rather than signaling the end of humanity, could actually represent its salvation, are some of the beliefs that this myth stealthily enforces upon its target societies. Following Barthes and the idea of myths as de-politicized speech, the myth of the cyberspace is a speech which naturalizes and hides from critical scrutiny these beliefs and the ideology that generates them: its visions (e.g. of the relationship between technology and social order) and its projects. In this capacity, the myth of the cyberspace combined with the myth of the «information revolution» (Traber 1986) to hide and naturalize the influence of Neoliberalism in the political economy of technological development, after the collapse of the «post-war consensus» (Barbrook and Cameron 1996). As one may expect, the ambivalence of cyberspace and its myth stretches to the notion of fear associated with it. Cyberfear is not merely the fear of the cyberspace but, more radically - the fears associated with all that the notion of cyberfear includes in its denotation and connotation; - the fears that the myth of the cyberspace contributes to both expressing and suppressing; - the fears associated with our forced participation to a social world in which the digital infrastructure plays an increasingly intrusive, dominant but also vulnerable role.

As the cyberspace can be both a space of emancipation and oppression, cyberfear includes both the fear of being left out and of being trapped in; of being denied its services as well as that of being enslaved by it. As myths are inherently ambivalent (Mosco 2004, 10), also the fear(s) associated to them are ambivalent. The «return of the suppressed» (Stocchetti 2020b, 2-3) transforms utopia into dystopia: from the cyberspace as a promise to the cyberspace as a «paranoid» threat (Mason *et al.* 2014); from the dream of the «information society», to the nightmare of the «disinformation society» (Marshall 2017); from the emancipation of the «information revolution» to the oppression of «surveillance capitalism» (Zuboff 2019).

Finally, cyberfear is itself part of the broader landscape of the politics of fear of our age. Its nature and social meaning need to be interpreted in relation with other fears such as e.g., the bio-fear of pandemics, the eco-fear of climate

change, the old fear of economic crises, and the re-vitalization of nuclear fear. These fears combine to increase the value of security, to decrease the value of freedom and to tighten the control over the production of knowledge associated with them. At the same time, however, this combine also suggests that security, freedom and knowledge are key stakes in the politics of fear throughout its domains: in the competition for the control over the distribution of fear and other values in society.

#### 4. The politics of cyberfear

If the politics of fear is a strategy for the control over the distribution of fear through the manipulation of the relative value of freedom and security, the politics of cyberfear can be conceived as a strategy for the control over the distribution of fears associated with the cyberspace and its myth. However, as ambivalence is a fundamental feature of the cyberspace and its myth, the disambiguation of this ambivalence is also a fundamental aspect of the rationale for the politics of cyberfear.

The social function of dystopic narrations, like Gibson's *Neuromancer*, is not that of blueprints but rather that of vaccines. It consists in the emotional mobilization of human reason against the fears generated by our imagination and perhaps our psychological defenses against the ever present and ever suppressed fear of death. If the dystopian world described by Gibson in 1984 was a warning, the 21st century «surveillance capitalism» is the notion describing the system in place to control the ambivalent potential of cyberspace. As Zuboff argued, surveillance capitalism broadens corporate freedom in the crucial domain of the production of knowledge, to bring about an epistemic regime inherently «antidemocratic and antiegalitarian... a form of tyranny that feeds on people but is not of the people» (Zuboff 2019, 513). In other words, surveillance capitalism is the capitalist response to the potential threat that the communicative, epistemic and ultimately democratic potentials of the cyberspace pose to capitalist «freedoms».

As a strategy of political communication, the main goal of the politics of cyberfear is thus the control of the affordances of cyberspace: the suppression of its radical potentials and the support of its ideological functions. The rationale for this goal is the fear of democracy and is not new. Already in the mid-Eighties, Winston discussed the «law» of the suppression of radical potential in the development of new technologies (Winston 1986, 23-24). A decade before that, influential scholars argued for the need to protect democracy from «the challenges of intellectuals... who asserts their disgust with the corrup-

tion, materialism, and inefficiency of democracy and with the subservience of democratic government to 'monopoly capitalism'» (Crozier *et al.* 1975, 6). It is presumably to achieve this goal that the ideological appropriation of new technologies has transformed the «information age» in the «disinformation age» (Marshall 2017; Stocchetti 2020a) and political participation in a form of behaviour whose effect «is not to strengthen and improve democratic governance, but to destroy it» (Bennet and Livingston 2021, 267).

In sum, if the myth of the cyberspace was meant to invite people to enter in and participate to the utopia of the cyberspace, the politics of cyberfear is the strategy to discipline this space turned into a dystopia. In this process there are at least five reasons that makes the politics of cyberfear detrimental for democracy.

First, it legitimizes (state and corporate) surveillance, the blurring of the public/private divide and the Orwellian logic of «you have nothing to fear if you have nothing to hide». Second, it construes the democratic potential of the cyberspace as a cause that weakens the strength of democratic regimes, rather than a tool to strengthen them, repressing the memory and the discontent for the betrayal of the promises associated to the myth of the «information revolution». Third, it promises relief from the risks of (cyber)life through the security of (cyber) surveillance but hides the fact that, in the corporate cyberspace, the relationship between (in)security and surveillance is a dialectical one: each feeds the other and together contribute to the communicative effacement of democracy. Fourth, it supports the «rendition of personal experience» and people inclusion in a world where people's lives are the raw material of capitalist accumulation (Zuboff 2019, 254-268), inciting to an even greater dependence on surveillance technologies as the only positive form of adaptation to survive in a space we cannot escape and ruled by forces we cannot fight. Fifth, and most broadly, it naturalizes a culture of technological dependence and compliance that generates anxiety and feeds an endless demand of control, reassurance, security, surveillance, and drains intellectual energies away from the possibility of challenging the ideological grounds of the production of fear in the social and natural environments.

The critical engagement with the politics of cyberfear invites to interpret the cyberspace as a space of contention and, for example following Robin (2004, 3), to question approaches that constructs as united what is actually divided, as conflict-free what is actually conflict-ridden, as established and hegemonic what is instead contested. It means to question the political economy of the production of knowledge about the cyberspace or, in other words, its epistemic dimension. The epistemic demands associated to the politics of (cyber)fear in the 21st century are ultimately the same facing Eve and Adam in the Earthly Heaven: suppress curiosity and its radical potential, dread the

possibility of radical change, choose the comfort of a known control over the risks of unknown freedom. In this perspective, the politics of (cyber)fear is the last resort of an epistemic regime that, having exhausted the capacity to exhibit its merits, can only survive by cultivating fear to suppress the production of knowledges that may inspire rebellion. This strategy, however, has toxic effects on democracy because political fear is not the «food» but the poison of democracy: not what can strengthen democracy but what may actually bring about its demise. To save our intoxicated democracy we must become (cyber) fearless citizens.

## 5. Forming (cyber)fearless citizens: Let us eat more apples!

If fear is inherent to the human condition, the mediation of critical knowledge is the remedy against the politics of fear, i.e., against the instrumentalization of fear for political purposes. As socio-political order depends on power and knowledge, to give a closer look to the epistemic dimension of the politics of (cyber)fear is useful to tackle this fear in ways to strengthen, rather than weaken, democracy. This dimension includes the production of knowledge but also the relations of power that are reproduced or challenged in the process.

For example, an influential approach to cyberfear focuses on the individual and the paranoid aspects of cyberfear. The recommendation to «increase technological proficiency and awareness» to «bring about a reduction in cyber-paranoia» (Mason *et al.* 2014, 1) is ambivalent because, while pointing to knowledge as the solution, it also frames fears that are eminently political (e.g. the protection of privacy) within psychiatric discourse. This recommendation, in other words, falls short to engage with the forces involved in the production and authorization of knowledge and in the design, development and deployment of technologies that populate our social world. The engagement with the epistemic dimension of cyberfear inspired by emancipative purposes should ask Lasswell's questions «who gets what, when and how» in relation to the politics of cyberfear, and critically evaluate the legitimacy of the interests and practices of political actors that participate to the production of technology and the authorization of knowledge. It means to question assumptions concerning technological development, the socio-political order and the relation between the two and to argue the case for interpretative competences to resist the crippling effects of Neoliberalism on our chances to participate in these processes as citizens, rather than mere consumers.

The pathologization of (cyber)fear, combines with the «psychocriminalization of anti-capitalist resistance» (Rimke 2016, 24) and participates to the production of phobias as «means by which the social world is ordered and in which responses are formulated» (Ramadan and Shantz 2016, 4). This hegemonic mobilization of fear, however, depends on epistemic conditions (e.g. the activation of psychiatric or legal discourses) but can also be challenged on epistemic grounds (e.g., questioning the political economy of the cyberspace or the ethics of global capitalism). Furthermore, the construction of fear as a problem of the individual rather than society as a whole weakens people's trust in democracy because the fundamental appeal of this political regime consists in its capacity to remove political fear from the relationship between the individual and society, the citizens and their representatives, the (dis)comfort of continuity and the risks of social change, the appeal of freedom and its price in terms of (in)security.

To challenge cyberfear and its politics on epistemic grounds, I suggest at least three steps. First, we need to reject the idea that social order depends on fear and re-evaluate the role of the production of knowledge in the constitution, preservation and, if necessary, in the subversion of the socio-political order so to challenge the structural conditions associated to the production of fear, and not merely dealing with their effects. It means to deploy the emancipative potential of the idea widely shared among philosophers and sociologists of knowledge, that the production of (scientific) knowledge is both influenced by and influential upon its environments (Alasuutari 2018; Fricker 2007; Godin and Spiekermann 2018; Habermas 1971; Haraway 1988; Morris 2016; Jasanoff 2004; Pels 2003; Wood 2020; Edenberg and Hannon 2021).

The second step is the de-naturalization and politicization of the cyberspace: debunking the myth of the cyberspace as a natural space and the appreciation of its social nature as a contested space so far under corporate control but that can and must be brought back under the control of democratic institutions. This denaturalization and politicization are essential for the democratization of technology advocated by Feenberg (1992), and for the subordination of technological development to the demands of democracy, rather than surveillance capitalism.

Last but not least, the epistemic engagement with (cyber)fear must deliver in education. Knowledge is the best vaccine against fear but, just as vaccines are useless if they are not delivered to the population, to strengthen epistemic competence (Grossnickle *et al.* 2017) in education is the key to strengthening democracy against the risks and fears associated with the social and natural environments. Learning how to use technology should not be synonymous with indoctrination to the myths of the cyberspace. To re-actualize the idea of

popular sovereignty in terms of «digital sovereignty» (Floridi 2020), we need pedagogical approaches combining democratic ideals and epistemic competences to enable the democratization of technology and the resistance against oppressive appropriation of these technologies by non-democratic ideologies.

In the terms of the myth of the Apple, to look at the epistemic dimension of the politics of (cyber)fear means not only to eat more apples, but to interpret the ban from paradise not as a fall from grace but as a liberation from ignorance and the condition of captivity associated with that. Succumbing to fear and giving up political sovereignty in exchange for the ambivalent reassurance of surveillance capitalism will not keep us in an artificial paradise but in a state of subjection. The mediation of knowledge is necessary to move from (cyber)fear to (cyber)freedom and for the experience of the cyberspace as a democratic space: a space where people can be both free and safe.

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