

FEAR OF THE OTHER: FEAR FOR THE OTHER¹

Few would dispute that, of the various natural springs that may be hypothesized as a cause of human action, fear stands as one of the main sources, if not the major one. In the context of formal political thought, if it is specifically Thomas Hobbes with whom we have come to associate a covenantal political theory which is based on fear being a primary agent, this does not mean we are not aware of the long history of this notion in our extant literature, beginning with the Athenian Thucydides, whose *History*, we should not be surprised to learn, Hobbes himself translated into English. In one of the early dialogues which Thucydides constructs in this work to explain the causes of the fighting which erupted between Athenians and Spartans, the Athenian representative is made to spell out fear, in addition to self-interest and aggrandisement, as what lies at the root of all human action, and as what motivates it. Indeed, it is also these notions, or ones comparable to them, which we find listed in Chapter 13 of *The Leviathan* as the principal causes of quarrel among men.

The central role that fear plays and has played in our lives, however, can easily be gleaned from far more fields than just formal politics. Easily recognized right from the beginning of human history as being elemental, and as extending to cover all kinds of natural and supernatural threats, we find full instrumental use of this emotion in world literatures and art forms as a source both of preventing or preempting harm being done, as well as of motivating or encouraging certain action. In the Epic of *Gilgamesh*, for example, Humbaba the fearsome monster plays the role of the fictive protector of Phoenicia's cedar trees against northern invaders. Gargoyles as front-

¹ First presented at a conference on the subject of fear organized by the Sorbonne-Abu Dhabi, 15th March 2009. I benefited a great deal from the other papers delivered at that conference, including from Jean Delumeau, whose book *La Puer en Occident XIV-XVIIIe Siecles* Paris, Hachette litteratures -1999 is already a classic.

pieces on buildings are meant to frighten unwelcome intruders. Awesomely painted faces and masks in the battlefields are intended to intimidate enemy warriors, while children's tales are filled with images of all kinds of wicked witches and monsters meant to discourage them from independent forays into dangerous places or from indulging in experiences that might bring them harm. Religious texts are similarly filled with well-meant awe-inspiring admonishments, fear of punishment being used as a way to prevent or contain untowardly and harmful behaviour. In all of these examples, the basic instinct of fear is drawn upon, used, or manipulated to encourage people to act in certain ways or to discourage them from so acting. In international relations, fear is also what lies behind much of military theory. It is used as justification for the build-up of weapons systems, including nuclear arms; for tight internal security regulations, sometimes involving infringements on human rights; as well as for wars and acquisition of territories, under the guise of strategic or so-called defensive "depth" requirements, as the argument is sometimes made by Israel for holding on to all or parts of occupied West Bank territory. What is euphemistically called the "balance of power" in discourses about international relations is in reality and ultimately nothing but a balance of fear.

But by "fear" what is commonly meant is "fear *for oneself*", and in the political literature on which I wish to concentrate in this presentation it has been used as a basic axiom for both explaining as well as justifying human associations, encouraging us to look upon these associations as sophisticated fortresses of self-defence, as though fear were the cornerstone holding those fortresses together, and as though the safe-guarding of security were the human association's justification or *raison d'être*. In Hobbesian language, it is the primary instinct of fear which underlies political covenants, or which explains vesting what he considers to be the principal right of nature, namely, that liberty which men have to use whatever is in their power to defend themselves, or to preserve their own lives, in a sovereign.² By extension of the same self-centered logic, it is for the preservation or legitimization of their own properties, or liberties,

² Thus also, by extension, in present-day anti-terror laws, state security, and arms-build-ups. Explanation here takes on the form of justification, where the appeal for all such measures is "freedom from fear".

respectively, that political thinkers such as John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau have sought and postulated answers for political covenants, or for why men come together to form associations. Otherwise, or left to themselves, in a state of nature, we are told, men would be in a constant state of war, forever in fear of having their lives, properties or liberties endangered by each other. In short, then, human associations, we are told, are entered into in order to avoid wars, in much the same way we are told that military build-ups, including of nuclear weapons, are supposed to bring us safety and to prevent wars.

It is against the background of this political tradition of social bonding and social contracts, ingrained deeply in contemporary Western political thought, and in international relations theories, that Ibn Khaldun's theory of *asabiyyah* as an *other*-centered sentiment or instinct is striking, and well-worth re-visiting. In effect he tells us that while the cornerstone of human associations is indeed fear, the fear that is of relevance in this regard is not fear *for oneself* but fear *for the other*.

The Hobbesian paradigm (reducing the foundations of the social contract to self-focused security concerns) paints a cynical picture of human affairs, and ignores almost completely other emotions and passions (Hume's "sympathy", for example) which figure importantly in human choices and actions. Indeed, as already stated, the role of fear in human actions is not exhausted in any case by benign motives, whether fear for oneself or fear for the other. And while, in the context of benign motives, Ibn Khaldun's emphasis on fear for the other as a cornerstone of human associations seems far more logical -as I shall try to show- than the Hobbesian approach, the latter on the other hand seems more akin to another brand of fear, born of malignant motives, namely, the fear which men seek to *instil in* one another in pursuit of their personal gain. Thus, driven by lowlier passions such as greed, self-aggrandisement or an over-inflated ego, whether personal or collective -forces and passions not commonly holding the same deference in our eyes as the justified fear

one may have for one's life, property or freedom- actors may carry out their aggressions under the camouflage of justified fear, precisely on account of our acknowledged deference to that fear. Instilling fear *in* the other in such circumstances, under the cover of fear for oneself, may stand out as being the most cynical manipulation of human values. Israel's use of overwhelming firepower, and the infliction of heavy civilian casualties as happened in the latest attack on Gaza, for example, was blatantly a tool to silence resistance, or opposition, to an unjust and ongoing occupation by one people over another. Israel's argument of self-defense against Gaza's Kassam rockets in no way can stand up to its dislodgment of one million tons of explosives from the air and ground amongst one and the half million inhabitants squeezed inside 140 square miles, all within the space of three weeks. Israel's argument, as often, was self-defence, which is the strategic product of fear (for itself). But the mere volume of Israel's military reaction to the Kassam rockets belies that claim.

Israel's behavior is a prime example of how a self-centered, Hobbesian brand of fear, unquestionably valid in itself, and blatantly justifiable in Jewish experience, can be turned backward, and become a tool of aggression against another people rather than play the associative role presumed for it. Instilling fear in others, and imposing a self-serving hegemony upon them, often under the thin guise of self-protection, has long been a mark of expansionist and imperialist regimes. In Israel's case, and next to mere jingoistic greed and an over-inflated sense of self-worth as thinly disguised motives, the further belief in being ordained to carry out a divine duty which happens to disenfranchise a whole people can take an even more gruesome dimension: the blatantly disproportionate response to Kassam rockets brought to surface a debate among some of Israel's rabbis³ whether to consider the decimating war against Palestinians an enactment of God's call upon the Israelites to wipe out the dreaded Amalek of Biblical fame.

³ *Haaretz* January 22, 2009, reports on Safed's Chief Rabbi statement that the war against *Hamas* is but a continuation of the war against Amalek. Not all Rabbis were of the same mind, however.

"Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey." (1 Sam. 15:2-3)

The Amalek were the feared "giants" (Muslim historiographies associate them with early Arab migrant tribes who came to inhabit the land of Palestine, and who were of large physical stature -the *amaliqah* in Arabic) who fought against the Israelite's migration to Palestine from Egypt under the command of Moses. Yet, even assuming that present-day Palestinians are the Amalek's direct descendants, positing them as the living replicate of a biblical enemy and as being such an existential threat to present-day Israelis is a logic that defies reason! Certainly, the experience of the Holocaust absolutely and in no uncertain terms both explains and justifies the Jewish search for a safe haven, fear being the indisputable engine powering this search; yet just as clearly it is a combination of a myriad of other kinds of factors, none having to do with compassion, and all primarily egotistic, including straightforward territorial greed, and an exaggerated sense of self-worth in whose very meaning is found an exaggerated disdain for the other, that may help explain Israel's continued disenfranchisement of the Palestinian people. A Hobbesian brand of fear here, or the egotistic instinct of "fear for oneself" or "fear for itself", clearly belong to a group of like instincts and emotions which by themselves can hardly explain the associative disposition accounting for and justifying the existence of a civil or political social order. Quite the contrary, in fact, they are more likely factors which explain human dissonance, aggressions and wars. And while fear (in all of its different brands) may well lie at the source of a variety of human actions, it does not seem to fully exhaust all the possible factors -both rational and irrational- accounting for the construction and dissolution of political contracts.

Be that as it may, I still believe, even if only for simplicity's sake, and within the varied assortment of possible causes and motivations of human action, that we can distinguish and set completely apart from one another two opposing paradigms, each vying for the same status of being the cornerstone of human associations, and its motivating impulse; and each being predicated on that primary

element of fear. I have already described the first as centering around the self, or as being fear *for oneself*. There is a well-defined theoretic road-map which Hobbes then lays out for us to explain how we proceed from a state of nature in which, impelled by this fear, we each have the right to self-defense, to a political leviathan in which we vest this right in the sovereign. The second paradigm is Ibn Khaldun's *asabiyyah* -let's call this "compassion"- which offers us in contrast a totally opposite starting-point, and an associated road-map. Significantly, compassion is other-centered, not self-centered. If we were reaching into the depths of human motivations and passions in search for a hypothesis which would explain to us how it is that we end up living together in a political association, or what is the glue that holds us together in the first place, then Ibn Khaldun's compassion, being other-centered, might indeed compete for first spot as being a far more logical working-hypothesis than the more common Hobbesian self-centered notion.

Let me point out as a reminder that what we are looking at is a psychological region, if we may call it that, which lies just before that in which associations are posited as having already come into existence, so to speak. Once posited as having come into existence, however, the Hobbesian and Khaldunian models converge in some aspects, in that intra-State as well as inter-State threats of aggressions are dealt with or made preventable only by virtue of the power and authority vested in the sovereign. It is *how* the sovereign comes to be vested with that authority in the first place, and how the authority comes to be binding, which sets the Khaldunian model apart from that of Hobbes.

Our focus for the moment, then, is still on the elementary level, or at the infrastructure of the human association, where we are seeking to identify that primary instinct which we might regard as the building-block of that association, and it is here that, like Hobbes and others both before and after, Ibn Khaldun cites fear of the other or of some external threat or danger as the initiating spark for action; but rather than citing fear of the other or of an external threat to *oneself* in this context, Ibn Khaldun underlines compassion, or preservation of the other, rather than self-preservation, as how this fear paradigmatically manifests itself. In other words, Hobbesian fear, as

this is first projected in the individual, is introverted. In contrast Khaldunian fear is externalized as being a concern for the other. It is precisely *on account of* the fear of the other that Hobbes's individual reaches out to the other, seeking to make a pact with them. For Ibn Khaldun, the pact, or glue, already exists, and it is *on its account* that one is prompted to reach out to help them.

As we know, instead of speaking about a state of nature and a civil state, Ibn Khaldun distinguishes between what he calls a pre-civil (*badawah*) and a civil (*hadarah*) state. But in both states it is ultimately this bond of compassion, initially built upon- quite logically, I submit- immediate blood-relation bonds, or *silat al-rahm*, that makes for the formation of associations, their strength in self-defense, and their longevity.

Blood-relations as elementary building blocks of human associations may not sound “sophisticated”, and familial and tribal bonds in the anciently-rooted societies of the near-east are often patronizingly viewed as being immature or ill-formed civic associations, while well-formed political associations are often presented as advanced forms of political associations rooted in the more “sophisticated” notions of economics (property), politics (freedom) or psychology (fear for oneself). In contrast, prejudice in favor of one's kin may be viewed as being too primitive a passion to constitute the roots of a respectable political theory. Be that as it may, in Arabic “*rahm*” (from *silat al-rahm*, or blood-relation bond) stands for “womb”; but “*rahmah*”, the word for mercy, and “*rahim*”, for compassionate, both being the basic descriptions of God in Islam⁴, are also derived, perhaps not surprisingly, from that same trilateral root. In Chapter 2 of Book 1 of *Al-Muqaddimah*, where Ibn Khaldun first introduces and defines what he means by compassion, he says that compassion is formed from this basic blood bonding which is on the whole found naturally among human beings, and manifests itself -and here I wish to quote- “*through a prejudicial instinct favoring blood-relatives lest they come under a misfortune or be fatally attacked. For, a person will find it abhorrent if a relative is about to be violated or aggressed, and will seek to intervene between his relative and that harm in order to prevent it from happening to him. This is a natural*

⁴ All Quranic verses begin with invoking the name of God, being the all-merciful and compassionate.

human instinct that has accompanied human beings since the beginning of time.”

The use here of the concept (the natural instinct) of coming in-between harm and the person who is about to be a victim of that harm is truly astonishing. Although Ibn Khaldun does not go as far as claiming that such intervention can be perceived and calculated as a risk to one's self, or to one's own safety and preservation, yet the logic is clear, and we can well imagine cases, representing the model we have at hand in its extreme form, where a human being will risk their own lives for the sake of their loved ones. Importantly, what Ibn Khaldun tells us here is that, faced by fear and danger it is this other-centered instinct, rather than the instinct for self-preservation, that holds the secret of the glue with which human associations are formed. Without denying the basic role which the egotistic impulse has in human psychology, here Ibn Khaldun tells us that it is the altruistic impulse of compassion which we must consider as we try to unravel the mystery of human associations.

Beginning with his “fear for oneself” as a starting point, Hobbes's hypothetical roadmap to the social contract is henceforth, and by necessity, monadic, as well as cerebral: step by rational step, person by person, through precepts found out by reason, and what Hobbes calls “laws of nature”, men move from fear for themselves towards establishing a covenant with others as the way to overcome that fear. His first law of nature consists in men being forbidden to do that which is destructive of their lives, etc. His second law of nature consists in that each man be willing to content himself with so much of his natural right to his own self-defense as he would allow other men. Eventually, and through a series of such steps, Hobbes leads the way to the Sovereign, in whose person as sovereign men find it best to vest their natural right to their own self-preservation, and therefore do so through a hypothetical covenant. Ibn Khaldun's road-map, in contrast, is tribal, and instinctual: his unit of discourse being communal and patriarchal rather than monadic in the first place, and the protective as well as the dependen-

cy elements as sub-units already being positioned in their naturally hierarchal place, he leads us, stage by societal stage, through a descriptive process whereby such groups or communities gradually grow in size and power, but ultimately begin to crumble, all in proportion to the vitality of the underlying element of compassion, which has already been identified as being the infra-structural glue binding the association together.

We thus have before us, drawn from the primal instinct of fear, two diametrically opposed paradigms of the human narrative, one self-centered or egotistic and the other other-centered or altruistic. As I already indicated, however, life is more likely far more complex than to be reducible just to one or the other of these two models, as though these were mutually exclusive of one another, or indeed the only contenders on the scene. But I would submit that if one of these paradigms has already been unduly overemphasized in political theory, encouraging us to see the world in terms of introverted fortresses whose legitimacy lies in the strength of its fortification, the other may help us see the world altogether differently, as a space whose salient feature are bridges of human compassion rather than fortifications.

There is perhaps an important lesson, reflecting itself on international relations theory, to be learnt from putting those two contrary models in sharp relief. Paradoxically, it is in Thucydides as well, in testimony from one among other various cultures steeped in history, that we are made aware of cases in political confrontations where the instinct for self-preservation -even for what may be considered self-interest- does not figure high as against other instincts; where, instead of a politics of power or of fear for example, we come face to face with what we might call a "politics of values". This is nowhere clearer as in the famous might versus right negotiation between the Melians and the Athenians, ending up in the tragic decimation of all Melian males.

Melian politics is in no way Hobbesian. Indeed some might say - especially in the Thucydidean context where reference to it is made- it is not politics at all. Yet, this Melian-type disdain for the Hobbesian calculus is rampant throughout history, manifesting itself in countless human revolts against militarily-backed injustice. One modern-day example of it may perhaps be the already referred-to context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where Israel's nuclear might does not seem capable of bending the Palestinian peoples' will. What may be significant about I just called "the politics of values" is that this may be more naturally rooted in, and more readily therefore explicable in terms of the "other-centered" rather than the self-centered instinct -altruism being a more naturally favorable soil for the acculturation of humane values than egotism. Alongside "fear for" as a paradigm of this, one may cite a handful of like emotions, such as love, or sympathy, or respect, or friendliness, etc., all of which could be seen as belonging to the same cluster of positive primary instincts, and all together which may account for the peaceful associations (rather than fortresses of defence) men strive to make.

Given these remarks as background I wish to conclude by trying to rearrange the place of the Hobbesian politics of power in the human narrative. I already referred passingly to some of the other motivations which may stand behind human alliances and conflicts. Whether some or all of them could ultimately be reducible to fear is an open question, best answered by psychologists. In any case, even assuming that fear is just one among various primary instincts, we could still pit Ibn Khaldun's politics of compassion as one paradigm of how such an instinct manifests itself in human behaviour as against the Hobbesian paradigm. A politics of compassion, freed of its Khaldunian origins, and regarded as the natural soil for a politics of values, can thus be regarded, not only as the other side of the mirror of the human soul, but as a more evolved human stage of addressing the primal instinct of fear. Ibn Khaldun's model, we already know, is sociological and descriptive rather than moral or normative. With a stretch, one may be able to construct a moral politics out of it. Fear for the other, though intended initially to explain

tribal solidarity, could well be drawn upon, if reframed to fit our increasingly globalized village, to explain a more global human solidarity. Based upon this first axiom of human universalism -the primal instinctive sympathy for the other- various principles, all of a moral flavour, may follow, such as the principle of rights, foremost the right to freedom for all. My point is, events such as the Melian rejection of Athenian hegemony back in the 5th century B.C., or such as the black struggle for political emancipation in the U.S. in the midst of the last century, among a million other examples; as well as the creation and proliferation of consensual international institutions and instruments -including, for example, the international Bill of Human Rights- can all be looked upon as manifestations of a historical dynamic whose imprint on historical development may at the end of the day prove to be far stronger than the politics of self-interest and of power. True, our sense of bonding or solidarity with the world poor, or with those under threats of different kinds, may not yet fully rise to that level identified by Ibn Khaldun where we would “wish we could put ourselves in-between the source of the threat or danger and the party being threatened”. But even so, humanitarian interventionism in particular, and world solidarity more generally, are today far stronger than they have ever been, and the curve seems to be ever-rising.

Primarily, the fear for the other impulse is one that asserts absence of human distance. The other, instinctually, is felt to be but a part of the human domain which I inhabit -an extension of myself in another form. But distances can sometimes seem far, and the terrain therefore so alien and fearsome, that the other can quickly come to be viewed as a source of fear rather than an object of solidarity. A politics of compassion, therefore, would seek as an objective to eliminate or collapse the distances between oneself and the other, distances of gender, race, religion, social habits, color- in all, in part by learning to respect that difference as difference, and in part by learning to feel it as another form or part of oneself. If the politics of fear, in other words, is a politics of war, then a politics of compassion, generalized from the Khaldunian context so as to reach out to the rest of the humanity, may be seen as a politics of peace.

At the end of the day, I feel that a politics of compassion is relevant wherever conflict and discord exists. Its relevance applies to discord within communities as to conflict between them. It is relevant because, sooner or later, it is bound to replace the politics of fear. Our task as educators is simply to make that time come sooner rather than later.