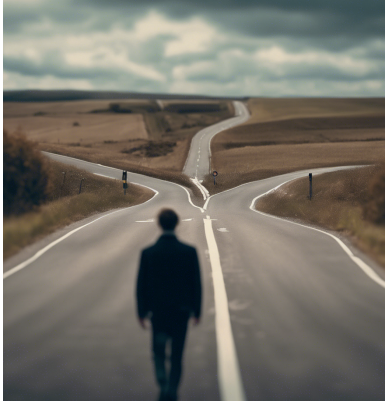


Conversation
with Robert
Peckham
edited by
Martina
Saltamacchia



Historical lens

The Power of Fear: A Historical Perspective

“Fear has this unique ability to unsettle the status quo, to challenge the certainties we take for granted, and in some cases, it can open up new possibilities. This process of disruption is often a precursor to meaningful change, both on a personal and collective level.” Professor Robert Peckham delves into the theme of fear, following a line of reasoning that leads to unexpected insights, even linking fear to our creativity. At the same time, he reflects on how, throughout history, fear has often been manipulated by institutions and governments as a pervasive form of social control. Exclusive interview.

Your most recent book, *Fear: An Alternative History of the World*, published in 2023, explores how fear has shaped societies from the fourteenth century to the present, from Western Europe to Asia and beyond. Can you explain your interest in fear as a central theme and what distinguishes your approach from previous studies?

Fear has been a topic of fascination for me because of its dual nature. I wanted to explore how fear operates on two distinct levels. First, there’s the idea of fear as a centralized tool, often used by governments and institutions to control or manipulate populations. You see this throughout history, where fear becomes an explicit instrument of governance. But then there’s another, more diffuse aspect—how fear disperses through systems like capitalism, industrialization, and even slavery. It becomes embedded in the fabric of society and is perpetuated through various structures. I find this duality compelling because it’s not just about fear being a top-down force but also about how it permeates everyday life through these systems. My book alternates between these two modes, exploring the centralization of fear and its dispersal. That’s a key distinction from previous works on the subject, where fear is often viewed in a singular, negative light. I wanted to examine it as something more complex.

You even talk about fear as being creative. How do you reconcile fear with something positive?

That’s a really interesting point, because when people think about fear, they often associate it with something purely negative—a force that restricts freedom and oppresses. But in the book, I explore fear’s complexity, particularly how it can also serve as a catalyst for change. Fear has this unique ability to unsettle the status quo, to challenge the certainties we take for granted, and in some cases, it can open up new possibilities. This process of disruption is often a precursor to meaningful change, both on a personal and collective level.

On a personal level, when we experience fear—whether it’s a health scare or an immediate threat—it often leads to new clarity. In those moments, our priorities suddenly shift. You begin to see what truly matters in life, often things you had taken for granted before. This new insight may not last long, but it offers a kind of temporary enlightenment. I believe that art, in many ways, helps remind us of these moments by evoking that clarity vicariously, allowing us to reconnect with those experiences.

And how do you see this same process happening on a societal scale? Can fear similarly clarify priorities for an entire society?

Absolutely. We also see this dynamic on a collective, historical scale. For example, after World War II, societies underwent an incredible shock that forced a reevaluation of what was important, pushing society to prioritize public health and welfare in ways it hadn’t before. What’s interesting is that fear can be both repressive and liberating. While fear can certainly lock us down, it can also push us to rethink our world and explore new opportunities.

Historically, fear has been intertwined with societal reforms. In the 19th century, for example, many of the reforms we consider humanitarian were actually motivated by fear—fear of urban unrest, fear of diseases spreading in industrial cities, or fear of revolutions. These fears spurred middle-class movements to address issues like poverty and public health, not only out of compassion but also as a protective measure.

That brings me to what I call benevolent fear. Fear doesn’t just inhibit us—it can also protect what we value. Historically, thinkers like Aquinas have discussed how love, hope, and fear are intertwined. When we love something deeply, we fear losing it, and that fear drives us to safeguard what we hold dear. In that sense, fear has an important role in protecting the things we value. This is why I argue that fear can have a positive, protective quality, motivating us to take action to preserve what matters most.

So, in this broader sense, fear is not just a coercive tool. It can serve as a check on complacency, prompting us to take action when we might otherwise remain stagnant. There’s this complexity to fear—it can close down possibilities but also open them up, pushing us toward new directions and opportunities that may not have seemed possible before.

You’ve mentioned how fear has historically acted as a catalyst for change. How do you see this pattern continuing today, especially in the context of modern political fears and the challenges we face?

We are living in an age where fear is central to political discourse, especially in countries like the United States. Fear dominates the conversation—whether it’s the fear of immigrants, economic collapse, or environmental catastrophe. It’s pervasive, and what I find particularly striking is how politicians use fear as a tool to manipulate or motivate the public.

We’ve entered a period where aspirational politics—politics that aspires to value—have been replaced by fear-based rhetoric. The danger here is that this creates a cycle of fear. Once a fearful scenario is presented, even those who wish to counter it are trapped in the discourse of fear. To respond, any counterargument ends up having to address that fear, and the discussion remains within that fearful framework. This makes it incredibly difficult to move beyond fear-based politics, even when we need to focus on forward-looking, aspirational goals—like tackling social and environmental issues, where urgent, hopeful action is required.

Another key theme of your book is the relationship between fear and freedom. Can you elaborate on that?

This is one of the more complex relationships I explore in the book. Traditionally, we tend to

think of fear and freedom as opposites—that when we're fearful, we are not free. But I'm interested in how fear and freedom interact in more complicated ways.

Kierkegaard offers a compelling starting point for this discussion. He talks about fear as the price of freedom. When we are faced with freedom, with choice, it can be paralyzing because of the fear of making the wrong choice. So, freedom creates fear, in a way. And this is particularly relevant to modern times. We've never had more choices than we do today, yet that freedom can be overwhelming. Whether it's in politics, technology, or personal decisions, we face countless choices, and with that comes a new kind of fear—fear of making the wrong choice, fear of the unknown.

This is where fear can become paralyzing. When people are overwhelmed by the choices that freedom brings, there is often a desire for someone to step in and make those choices for them. This is how authoritarian figures gain power. They present themselves as the ones who can relieve the burden of choice, offering certainty in a world of uncertainty. But of course, this brings us back to a different form of fear—an older, more oppressive form, where freedom is restricted in exchange for security. So, in a sense, fear and freedom are deeply intertwined, and the challenge is in navigating that relationship.

You also touch on the topic of artificial intelligence in your book. Do you see the fears surrounding AI as similar to those people had during the Industrial Revolution?

There are definite similarities. If you look back to the 19th century, people were deeply worried about the alienation of the human being in the face of mechanization. There were fears that machines would replace human labor, that they would take over. Writers like HG Wells were already imagining scenarios where machines gained consciousness. So, in that sense, the fears about AI are echoes of the fears people had during the Industrial Revolution.

However, I think today's fears around AI are also fundamentally different. We are now plugged into a virtual world in a way that's entirely new. AI is not just a tool; it's becoming an extension of our cognitive processes. The integration of AI into our everyday lives is more intimate, more personal. We're already seeing how AI is shaping decision-making, even creativity, in ways that were unimaginable during the Industrial Revolution. So while the language of fear around AI echoes the past, the implications today are far more profound.

There's also the issue of inequality when it comes to technology. Much of the world is still not connected or lacks access to the benefits of advanced technology like AI. We talk about AI as a global phenomenon, but vast parts of the world are disconnected from this conversation. These disparities create different kinds of fear. In some places, it's the fear of being left behind technologically; in others, it's the fear of losing control over the systems shaping our lives.

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You've emphasized the importance of looking at fear through a historical lens. Why do you think this perspective is so important for understanding fear today?

One of the most important things we can do when it comes to fear is to understand its history. Fear doesn't just appear out of nowhere—it has a history, and that history shapes how we experience and respond to it today. For example, many of the fears we deal with today—whether in politics, economics, or culture—are deeply rooted in systems that were established centuries ago. Fear was central to the governance of empires, especially during periods of colonization, and those legacies are still with us. Understanding how fear was used in these contexts helps us to see how it continues to operate in the present. It also empowers us to see that fear is not immutable—it's something that can be modified, something we can change.

Without a historical perspective, we risk seeing fear as a purely biological or intrinsic part of human nature. That's disempowering because it makes us feel like victims of fear. But if we understand that fear has been produced and perpetuated within certain political, social, and economic systems, then we can start to challenge it and redeploy it in a different way towards what I call a benevolent fear.

One of the major issues you explore in your book is the marketization of fear. Could you explain how fear is commodified in today's society?

This is one of the more troubling aspects of how fear operates today. Fear has become a commodity. It's something that is marketed to us on a daily basis, whether through politics, the media, or consumer products. Take the medical industry, for example. We're constantly told to fear aging, illness, or discomfort. These fears are then used to sell us products—medications, supplements, treatments—that promise to alleviate those fears.

But the problem is that this doesn't eliminate fear; it amplifies it. The more we're told to fear something, the more we feel the need to buy into solutions that are often more about profit than about genuinely addressing our concerns. This is how fear becomes a self-perpetuating cycle. In politics, it's much the same. Leaders who promise to rid society of fear often do so by introducing new fears. Historically, figures like Stalin or Mao claimed to rid their nations of fear but did so by creating a new set of fears, often more insidious than the ones before. Fear is both the tool and the product in this cycle.

You've mentioned that fear is more pervasive today, but does that mean we are more fearful now than in the past?

That's a complex question. In some ways, we do seem more fearful because fear is so pervasive in the discourse. You can't open a newspaper or turn on the television without encountering fear-based narratives. Fear dominates our conversations. But that doesn't necessarily mean we're more fearful than people in the past. What's different is the volume—fear is louder today.

We're articulating our fears more openly, which might be a good first step toward managing them. The problem, however, is that we can become so consumed by our own fears, especially in the Western world, that we forget about the very real, often more tangible fears experienced by people in other parts of the world. For example, while we in Europe or North America may talk endlessly about fear, there are places like China or Russia where fear is an actual lived experience of oppression, and it isn't always discussed in the same way. So, we have to be mindful of the fact that while we're drowning in discourse about fear, there are places where fear is far more acute, yet less openly acknowledged.

You conclude your book on a note of hope, which seems surprising for a work centered on fear. How do you maintain that hopeful outlook?

I think the key is in understanding fear's dual nature. Fear can be repressive, but it can also open up new possibilities. History shows us that fear has often prompted necessary change, like in the post-World War II era when the fear and collective trauma experienced during the war led to the creation of institutions like the National Health Service in the UK. So, in many ways, fear has the potential to create clarity and drive progress.

And I would argue that part of what we need to do is reclaim fear as a benevolent force—something that motivates us to protect what we value and to act proactively, rather than being paralyzed by it. Fear, when managed correctly, can push us toward necessary reform, inspire innovation, and force us to confront uncomfortable truths that require action.

It sounds like history plays a fundamental role in shifting from a fear-centered view of the world to one that is more proactive and empowering.

Absolutely. History gives us the tools to contextualize fear, to understand its origins, and to see how it has been navigated in the past. By learning from history, we can begin to reshape our relationship with fear. If we become more historically conscious as a society, we'll be better equipped to address the challenges we face today and in the future, rather than falling into the trap of defensive, fear-driven responses. We need to engage with fear, not as something to be eradicated, but as a force that can guide us toward a better future.



Robert Peckham is an academic, writer and journalist. He is the founder of Open Cube, an organization that promotes the integration of the arts and humanities with science and technology.