Martha Nussbaum Explores the Emotions Fueling a Political Crisis

By Becky Beaupre Gillespie

It wasn’t the way Martha C. Nussbaum’s work usually began: provoked by an unbidden sense of alarm, unfolding with the sort of restless urgency that preempts sleep and invites unplanned investigation. And yet there she was, alone in a Japanese hotel room the night after the 2016 US presidential election—and just hours after formally accepting the prestigious Kyoto Prize in Arts and Philosophy—probing her own visceral reaction to events at home, rethinking her work on political emotions, and trying to pierce the discordant fog that seemed to have settled over much of America.

“I was trying to get on top of my own very upset emotions, thinking, ‘What’s going on with me? What’s going on in the country?’” said Nussbaum, the University of Chicago’s Ernst Freud Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics and one of the world’s leading philosophers. People on both sides of the political divide seemed angry, envious, and disgusted.

But even more, Americans seemed afraid.

And that, Nussbaum knew, wasn’t good: unexamined fear has a way of riling up the other emotions and clouding rational thought, often leading, as she’d later write, “to aggressive ‘othering’ strategies rather than useful analysis.”

“My previous books had taken the emotions one by one, but I saw that I needed to link them all together more closely and see how fear bubbles up and infuses them all,” said Nussbaum, who is appointed in both the Law School and Department of Philosophy. “I needed to go deeper.”

The result, just 20 months later, is The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis (Simon & Schuster), a book that blends ancient Greek and Roman thought, psychology, history, neuroscience, and even the musical Hamilton to explore the roots, structure, and political ramifications of fear, closely examining its interplay with envy, disgust, and anger. Fear, she explains, is a trickster that lures people into believing that complicated problems have easy solutions, often convincing them that they can conquer their feelings of helplessness through scapegoating, revenge, and exclusion.

“It becomes not about fixing a complicated problem like [the labor market effects of] automation or outsourcing,” Nussbaum said. “That would require expertise and collaboration. No, [you start hearing words] like ‘immigrants’ and ‘infestation.’”

It’s a familiar trope, one that surfaces early in life in fairy tales like “Hansel and Gretel,” where serious problems like hunger and poverty are replaced by straightforward predicaments with obvious culprits, Nussbaum said, adding that the “simple fix” concept was likely aimed at soothing childhood terrors.

“Just find the witch in the woods, throw her into the oven, and then the world is just great,” she said. “Of course, it has bad social implications because rarely are problems that easy to solve.”

Nussbaum brings together many elements of her previous work—from the dangers of retributive anger to the ways in which projective disgust has been used to subjugate women and minorities—and weaves in ideas from a variety of disciplines. She looks to neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux to understand the amygdala’s role in producing fear, and draws on the work of the ancient Roman poet Lucretius to examine fear’s primacy, including its roots in infantile helplessness, its development into an adult fear of death, and its ability to infect other emotions. Aaron Burr’s desire to be “in the room where it happens” in Hamilton provides a vivid example of how envy can grow from a feeling of powerlessness and zero-sum competition, and ideas put forth in a recent book by the young philosopher Kate Manne factor into Nussbaum’s chapter on sexism and misogyny, which unpacks the “toxic brew” of blame, disgust, and envy that can fuel hostility toward successful women.

But fear, Nussbaum said, has a flip side: hope. The two emotions share a common foundation—powerlessness—but hope ultimately pushes its adherents in the opposite direction, she said. It’s what leaders like the late Martin Luther King Jr. did well. “King was very good at turning fear and anger into constructive, doable work and hope,” Nussbaum said. And that’s what is needed today: concerted efforts aimed at containing fear and nurturing good citizenship, Nussbaum said. She describes five “practices of hope”: engagement with the arts, critical thinking, religion, protest movements, and the development of theories of justice.

Ultimately, the path forward requires awareness, and Nussbaum hopes The Monarchy of Fear shines a light on fear’s harmful seduction. “I want people to understand the dynamic of fear and powerlessness, to see how it can lead to scapegoating, so they will catch it when it happens and subject it to scrutiny,” she said. “If they understand that dynamic in general, they won’t be duped. They’ll say, ‘Wait a minute, this isn’t really like ‘Hansel and Gretel.’ You can’t just put the witch in the oven.’”

A slightly longer version of this article is available on the Law School’s website at https://www.law.uchicago.edu/news/when-fear-becomes-hope.