

# **SYMBOLAE EUROPÆAE**



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## Elusiveness of safety in the Age of Anxiety. Is it worth pursuing?

When William H. Auden coined the term „The Age of Anxiety” shortly after WWII, other men of letters eagerly picked it up<sup>2</sup>. It seemed to express the gloomy mood of the era, the post-war Zeitgeist. However, even before that – also in the aftermath of a World War, but the first one – William B. Yeats had written „The Second Coming”, a poem that opens with these lines:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold*

The opening lines of Yeats’ poem may serve as a motto for two counts. Firstly, it sheds some light on the methodology of this paper – it’s a „bird’s-eye view” methodology of analysing problems in search of the bigger picture: the historic and present elusiveness of safety and the ambiguity of its value. Secondly, it leads straightforwardly to the very characteristics of the present-day situation in the western world with regard to safety and security issues. Yeats evokes a vivid picture: the gyre like a whirlpool swallows things that finally fall apart, the bonds break. In other words, the lines reflecting the aftermath of the Great War draw a sketch of a fundamental crisis of western culture and civilization. It is a crisis of its axiological core. Although the phrase „culture crisis” may sound rather theoretical and innocent, when translated into the lives of individuals and their families, seen from a bottom-up perspective, it speaks volumes about anxiety and insecurity.

In what follows, apart from investigating the afore-mentioned issue of the dubiousness of safety, I am going to take up the question whether the „culture crisis” generates insecurity in our „Age of Anxiety”. Despite countless and elaborate actions we undertake to change this status quo, anxiety seems to be still thriving in our day and age. Despite the historical decline of violence in public life, despite extended average life expectancy, despite the welfare and well-being of western societies, anxiety is alive and kicking. A quick Google check brings hun-

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<sup>1</sup> **dr hab. Zbigniew Danielewicz, prof. PK** – Politechnika Koszalińska.

<sup>2</sup> Thus William H. Auden titled his book-length poem (1944-1946), and then Leonard Bernstein his symphony. Next a film director Woody Allen and psychologist Rollo May picked up the term.

dreds of millions hits for „anxiety”, „fear” or „apocalypse”. The interest is soaring and mirrors the changing moods very well<sup>3</sup>. It seems that back in the post-war period the term reflected the mood equally adequately. The war was gone but the aftertaste of dread and disquiet stayed there. In fact there were some much earlier precursors of the age of anxiety, starting with Sören Kierkegaard and Frederick Nietzsche. Interestingly enough, they both wrote in 19th C., at a time of the triumphant march of progress in science and technology, industry and agriculture, social welfare and healthcare. Indeed, as Zygmunt Bauman reveals the intentions behind the progress, „Modernity was to be the great leap forward: away from that fear and into a world free of blind and impermeable fate – that greenhouse of fears<sup>4</sup>”.

Karl Jaspers was another author struck by WWI atrocities. In his slightly forgotten work „The Man in Modern Age” (1933), he aptly scrutinized the mood and indicated its possible roots. For Jaspers „One of the most notable characteristics of our day is a progressive and irremediable loss of substance. (...) Everything has become questionable; the substance of everything is”. Imminent then „seems the collapse of that which for millenniums has constituted man’s universe”. Given the experience of such a crisis of culture, anxiety ensues almost naturally. Intense dread of life, that „modern man’s sinister companion”, attaches itself to every sphere of life<sup>5</sup>.

Jaspers and Yeats both imply a similar thing: the very substance and structure of the base of culture and civilization seem to have been shattered, weakened and threatened, everything has become debatable and relativised. A more contemporary voice of Z. Bauman, who coined the phrase „Liquid modernity”, sounds quite similar. The liquidity he is talking about is a metaphor for the nature of our times: the liquid and unreliable present as opposed to the solid and dependable past. In his opinion the ongoing processes of disintegration of social networks and bonds, the falling apart of agencies designed to promote human cooperation, and degeneration of authorities and approved codes of conduct are often scented „with a good deal of anxiety”<sup>6</sup>. Actually, the scent is strong enough to create a „climate of fear” (Wole Soyinka) or even the whole „culture of fear”<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> 166 m hits for “Anxiety, 480 m for „fear”, and for „apocalypse” 87.5 m (interestingly some 3 years ago anxiety gave out only 40m). Cf. J. Le Doux, *Anxious. The Modern Mind in the Age of Anxiety*, Miejsce wydania 2015, p. 5-7.

<sup>4</sup> Z. Bauman, *Liquid Fear*, Cambridge 2006, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> K. Jaspers, *The Man in Modern Age*, trans. E and C Paul, London 1933, p. 62-63, 79-80, 82.

<sup>6</sup> Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge 2006, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> The works that set the pace of discussion and fueled its flame in recent years include: W. Soyinka, *Climate of Fear. The Quest for Dignity in a Dehumanized World*, Random



What Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Yeats, Auden and Bauman and many other contemporary adherents of „the culture of fear” thesis try to express is that for the past few generations we have been dealing with emerging threats to something we could call, after Anthony Giddens, *ontological security*<sup>8</sup>. This applies not only to individuals but also, indirectly, to their communities. It concerns „a person’s fundamental sense of safety in the world, and includes a basic trust to other people<sup>9</sup>”. That kind of security is so deeply rooted, and so obviously necessary to life, that we won’t be aware of its existence until it is threatened. It is just like air: invisible, transparent and odourless, but only a momentary lack of it proves fatal. The „air of ontological security” within cultures and societies is positively indispensable to their survival, it appears that it is getting thinner and thinner. The threats to „ontological security” of culture as a whole are ominously unobtrusive and can easily be overlooked.

On the other hand though, many consider the aforementioned prophets of doom as too pessimistic. Things can’t be that murky. They exaggerate with all that pessimism. Mind you, in this part of the world we have had unprecedented seven decades of peace and – for most of the time – prosperity. We are rather well fed and clothed, have shelters, and don’t die of violent deaths. Comfort and pleasure is often our daily share. No wonder then, that there are reliable authors who provide evidence to convince us that we live in good, if not best the times ever.

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House 2005; F. Furedi’s, *Culture of Fear. Risk-taking and the Morality of Low Expectation*, London New York 2002; D. Moisi’s, *Geopolitics of Emotions. How the Cultures of Fear, Humiliation, and Hope are Reshaping the World*, Anchor Books, 2010; D. Gardner’s, *The Science of Fear. How the Culture of fear Manipulates Your Brain*, Plume. Penguin Group, 2009, B. Glassner’s, *The Culture of Fear. Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things: Crime, Drugs, Minorities, Teen Moms, Killer Kids, Mutant Microbs, Plane Crashes, Road Rage and so many more*, Basic Books 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Ontological security, explains A. Giddens „refers to the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action”. As with the concept of trust, „a sense of reliability of persons and things” is basic to that kind of feeling of security. A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press 1990, p. 92.

<sup>9</sup> C. Kinnvall, *Globalization and Religious Nationalism in India. The Search for Ontological Security*, London-New York 2006, p. 29-30. Catarina Kinnvall explains briefly that ontological security lies in the belief that the story being told (the general discourse or narration) is good, optimistic and rests on a firm ground. Ibid, p. 29. Similarly Douglas Rushkoff ascribes the existential gravity for making sense of it all to „big stories”. However the present ongoing collapse of big narration marks one of the key alarming characteristics of our culture. Cf. D. Rushkoff, *Present Shock. When Everything Happens Now*, New York 2013, p. 15-23.

Steven Pinker, one of the most prominent adherents of „safety times” thesis in the opening paragraph of his massive volume *The Better Angels of Our Nature* claims straightforwardly: „This book is about what may be the most important thing that has ever happened in human history. Believe it or not – and I know that most people do not – violence has declined over long stretches of time, and today we may be living in the most peaceable era in our species’ existence”<sup>10</sup>. Langsam aber sicher, as the Germans like to say, the level of violence has been dropping for tens of thousands of years. The inner demons of our wild nature have been giving way to the better angels of our nature, i.e. to the social and political gains of human civilization. If we interpret violence as the epitome of insecurity, we may read Pinker as talking about the decline of fear and threats and the growth of safety. He is aware that acceptance of his position is not easy and instead invites „scepticism, incredulity, and sometimes anger”. But he explains that we react that way because „Our cognitive faculties predispose us to believe that we live in violent times, especially when they are stoked by media that follow the watchword <if it bleeds, it leads> (...) No matter how small the percentage of violent deaths may be, in absolute numbers there will always be enough of them to fill the evening news, so people’s impressions of violence will be disconnected from the actual proportions”<sup>11</sup>.

Seven peaceful decades are an outstanding phenomenon, and its results, every now and then, are reflected in research and public opinion polls. For instance, the White Book on the National Security of the Republic of Poland, issued by the auspices of the President of Poland in 2013, states that Poland’s condition of security, and the Poles’ feeling of safety are quite satisfactory<sup>12</sup>.

All in all, it seems a bit of a paradox – the age of anxiety being concurrent with the age of peace and security. According to Z. Bauman people in developed countries „live undoubtedly in some of the most secure societies that ever existed. And yet, contrary to the <objective evidence> (it is us) who feel more threatened, insecure and frightened, more inclined to panic, and more passionate about everything related to security and safety than people of most societies on record. This is the puzzle that needs resolution”<sup>13</sup>. Indeed it does. The parallel presence of proofs for safety and its opposite help us notice a paradoxical mechanism at work in modern society: the more safety we experience, the less safe we feel. This

<sup>10</sup> S. Pinker, *The better Angels of Our Nature* Pinker, Steven, *The Better Angels of Our Nature. A History of Violence and Humanity*, London 2011, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> [www.en.bbn.gov.pl/en/news/332,White-Book-on-National-Security-of-the-Republic-of-Poland.html](http://www.en.bbn.gov.pl/en/news/332,White-Book-on-National-Security-of-the-Republic-of-Poland.html) (access 1.12.2015).

<sup>13</sup> Z. Bauman, *Uncertainty and Other Liquid-Modern Fears*, in: J. Priban, T.D. Campbell (ed.), *Liquid Society and Its Law*, Ashgate Publishing Group, 2007, p. 17.

mechanism regards fear. Once fear appears among people, „it acquires its own momentum and needs hardly any attention to grow and spread<sup>14</sup>”. Nobody else but we ourselves are the scaremongers who spread fear by the very actions of counteracting it: when we encircle ourselves with walls, we change neighbours into burglars. At this very moment our risk valuation departs from its objective measure and we start preparing to fight nonexistent fears and neglect the real ones. „Public perceptions of risks – notes Anthony Giddens – are quite often at odds with reality”<sup>15</sup>.

And that is a vicious circle. That counterproductive procedure was already diagnosed in ancient times. Let us turn to an instance from classic sources: Plato’s dialogue *Gorgias*. It includes an inspiring conversation between Socrates and Callicles, a young and aspiring Athenian politician. Socrates asks Callicles if he thinks „that a man ought to make his chief ambition to prolong his life to the utmost limit, and spend it in the practice of the arts which constantly preserve us from danger – oratory, for example, which you advise me to cultivate as a protection in the law courts?”. Next, Socrates names some more possibly life-saving abilities: swimming, which saves people from death whenever they get into a situation that requires that ability, and navigation, which saves not only people’s lives, but also their property.

Nowadays such actions and abilities can be multiplied without end – healthy food, air bags in cars – especially in armoured cars like SUVs, alarm systems, CCTV cameras and so on. All of them are costly and time consuming – we can effectively spend our entire lives safeguarding ourselves. Unfortunately, none of them give a hundred percent protection. Having exposed the futility of the young Athenian’s advice, Socrates finally tells Callicles: „But I beg you, my friend, to reflect whether nobility and goodness may be something different from keeping oneself and others alive, and to consider whether a true man, instead of clinging to life at all costs, ought not to dismiss from his mind

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> A. Giddens, *The Politics of Climate Change*, Cambridge 2009, p. 32. A wave of anxiety with regard to possible child kidnapping hit the public in the US in the 1980s. A research carried out at the time proved however that the real risk was infinitesimal, whereas other, „ordinary” risk were neglected, like that of a child dying in a car crash due to not fastening the belt – only this instance brings on average two-thousand of children dying a year in the USA. „The extent of public agitation about abduction bore no real relation to the risk factor, compared to the relatively relaxed attitudes people hold towards other dangers”. Even despite the fact of statistics of serious crime rates going down, the public would stick to believing that it is quite the opposite. People’s attitudes toward risk perception started to change in the 1970 with the growth of electronic media, and it consisted in the conviction of the growing number of threats and fears. Cf. Ibid, p. 32-33.

the question how long he may have to live. Let me leave that to the will of God in the belief that the women are right when they tell us that no one can escape his destiny, and let him devote himself to the next problem, how can he best live the rest of life which is allotted to him”<sup>16</sup>. Socrates seems to imply that some measure of insecurity is indispensable to our personality development. Safety, although crucial and one of the human basic needs, is not free of ambiguity. Perhaps, instead of pursuing it at all costs, one should try to come to terms with insecurity, as it seems irremovable from our lives.

On religious ground, in the New Testament we find similar teaching regarding the attitude of a believer towards danger, on which the text provides a wider perspective. A part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mountain refers directly to our subject. „Therefore, I bid you put away anxious thoughts about food and drink to keep you alive, and clothes to cover your body. Surely life is more than food, the body more than clothes. Look at the birds of the air; they do not sew and reap and store in barns, yet your heavenly father feeds them. You are worth more than the birds!” The ultimate futility of any protection is exposed in the following fragment. „Is there a man of you who by anxious thought can add a foot to his height? And why be anxious about clothes (...) No, do not ask anxiously, “What are we to eat?, What are we to drink?, What shall we wear?” (...) your heavenly father knows that you need them all. Set your mind on God’s Kingdom and his justice before everything else, and all the rest will come to you as well. So do not be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow will look after itself. Each day has troubles enough of its own (...)” (Matt 6, 25-34)<sup>17</sup>. That broad perspective is God’s providence, and a deep trust in it on the part of the believer.

Karl Rahner, commenting on God’s providential universal care reveals that the value of safety is relative. Only through an adoring faith in the wise, saint and loving God can a Christian overcome that „anxious and proud need of safety”<sup>18</sup>. Hans Urs von Balthasar, another luminary of contemporary Christian theology, frames the message about safety and anxiety within Scripture as follows: „God’s Word is not especially concerned with protecting humanity in this world from suffering and death; neither did the Word enter the world simply to remove anxiety or to preserve people from it...” which was the ambition of some philosophers, e.g. the Stoics. In the Bible, discourse on anxiety is often

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. W. Hamilton, Ch. Emlyn-Jones, Penquin Classics, London 2004, p. 112-113 (511 b, c, d, e).

<sup>17</sup> *The New English Bible*, The Bible Societies in associations with Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press 1989.

<sup>18</sup> *Opatrzność Boża*, in: K. Rahner, H. Vorgrimler, *Mały słownik teologiczny*, trans. T. Mieszkowski, P. Pachciarek, Warszawa 1987, col. 301.

present and it is regarded as „a fundamental”, or „a basic given of human existence”.<sup>19</sup>

Insecurity and the lack of safety are effectively a part and parcel of life, and it has always been so. You cannot escape your shadow. While we often tend to idealise and overestimate the past, „Man’s critique of the times in which he lives is as old as man’s self-consciousness”. In asserting this, Karl Jaspers reminds us that we can trace our complaints back to ancient Egypt or the Hellenistic period<sup>20</sup>. It is hard to disagree with Daniel Bell’s observation that „There have been few periods in history when man felt his world to be durable, suspended surely (...) between chaos and heaven”<sup>21</sup>. German sociologist Ulrich Beck is unanimous with the two former authors claiming that „Threat and insecurity have always been among the conditions of human existence”. He adds that, in a way, it was even more so in the past. In the Medieval Ages for instance, numerous and various types of threats contributed to the premature death toll<sup>22</sup>. Is Beck thus speaking in favour of the „safety times” thesis? Neither yes, or no: he states that it „does not matter whether we live in a world that is objectively more secure than any that has gone before”<sup>23</sup>. The sheer answer would not help diminish the anxiety, nor solve anything. The only thing we can be sure of is that risk, uncertainty and insecurity are here to stay. Observational evidence suggests that our insecurity tolerance threshold has decreased in recent times<sup>24</sup>. A period of two or three „safe generations” resulted in us being increasingly frightened by many things that are seemingly beyond our control. Although most of them are human-generated, we feel equally defenceless as our ancestors in the past towards natural or transcendental threats. Decades of safety have lulled us into a false sense of security, depriving us of the necessary immunity to fear.

<sup>19</sup> H. Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian Anxiety*, San Francisco 2000, p. 39-40.

<sup>20</sup> K. Jaspers, *The Man in Modern Age*, p. 12.24.

<sup>21</sup> D. Bell, *The End of Ideology: On The Exhaustion of the Political Ideas in the Fifties*, Cambridge Mass. Harvard University Press 1960, p. 393. Interestingly, a couple decades earlier Karl Jaspers put down almost the same statement: „There were periods in which man felt his world to be durable, an unchanging intermediate between the vanished Golden Age and the end that would come in due course...” K. Jaspers, *The Man in Modern Age*, p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> U. Beck, *World at Risk*, Cambridge 2008, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> Or vice versa: our sensibility to danger has increased together with the range of possible threats Cf. B. Glassner, *The Culture of Fear. Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things: Crime, Drugs, Minorities, Teen Moms, Killer Kids, Mutant Microbs, Plane Crashes, Road Rage and so many more*, Basic Books 2000.

## Ulotność bezpieczeństwa w Wieku Niepokoju. Czy warte jest poszukiwań?

### Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje analizę dylematów i paradoksów związanych z niektórymi aspektami egzystencjalnego bezpieczeństwa. Obecna, gwałtownie rozwijająca się dyskusja na temat bezpieczeństwa może sugerować, że żyjemy w środowisku zdecydowanie niebezpiecznym. Być może jest to rezultat samego postrzegania ryzyka i to jedynie nasze odczucia podpowiadają nam, że potrzeba bezpieczeństwa jest słabo „zabezpieczona”. Możliwe też, że problem wypływa z zanizonego progu naszej tolerancji ryzyka. Ponadto, co dodaje złożoności całej problematyce życia w bezpiecznych lub niebezpiecznych czasach, istotne jest funkcjonowanie specyficznego i perwersyjnego mechanizmu: im więcej dokoła nas zabiegów na rzecz bezpieczeństwa, tym bardziej wydaje się, że jest mniej bezpieczeństwo.

Analiza ulotnego ideału bezpieczeństwa wydaje się prowadzić do samego sedna problemu widzianego z perspektywy indywidualnej, tj. do kwestii bezpieczeństwa ontologicznego. Dyskutowane pośrednio czy bezpośrednio od czasów starożytnej Grecji, Biblii i św. Augustyna, aż do współczesnych myślicieli jak Paul Tillich czy Anthony Giddens, bezpieczeństwo ontologiczne wydaje się pozostawać trwale nieosiągalnym. Niektórzy autorzy nawet stawiają pod znakiem zapytania sam sens całonocnego poszukiwania bezpieczeństwa jako ostatecznie nieefektywne i przeprowadzone kosztem nieodwracalnie upływającego czasu. Zamiast tego propo-

### Abstract

The paper analyses dilemmas and paradoxes of some chosen existential safety issues. The present and increasingly urgent discussion on safety/security implies that we live in a positively unsafe milieu. But on the other hand, it might be a matter of our sheer perception: we only feel that our safety need is poorly satisfied. Or perhaps, the problem lies in our lowered risk toleration threshold. What adds to the complexity of the general question of living in safe or not safe times, is the working of a specific and perverse mechanism: the more the issue of safety is addressed, the less safe we seem to be.

Analysing the elusive ideal of safety may bring us to what constitutes the very root of the problem, as seen from the perspective of an individual, i.e. the ontological safety. Discussed, directly or indirectly, from the times of the Ancient Greeks, the Bible and St. Augustine to modern thinkers like Paul Tillich and Anthony Giddens, ontological safety appears to stay ever-elusive. Some authors even question the very sense of the life-long pursuit of safety, as ultimately ineffective and carried out at the cost of non-returning time. They repeatedly propose some other investment of time and effort.

nują inwestowanie czasu i wysiłków w osiągnięcie innego celu.

### Słowa kluczowe

### Key words

Bezpieczeństwo ontologiczne, niepokój, dwuznaczność i ulotność potrzeby bezpieczeństwa, niejednoznaczność oceny współczesnego stanu bezpieczeństwa

Ontological security, anxiety, ambivalence and elusiveness of the need of safety, ambiguous assessments of present state of security

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