

## Introduction

The UBIAS 'Topic of the Year' (ToY) is a topic of global significance that will provide network member institutes with a possibility for engaging with and addressing an important topic through organizing various academic activities locally at the institutes, with respect for the particular expertise available and the special interests of the academic communities at each institute. The ambition behind the ToY is to gain new insights and to strengthen intercommunication between member institutes. Through announcements at the UBIAS website the possibility for mutual inspiration and participation in these activities is created.

## UBIAS Topic of the Year 2017: Fear

"Fear" is about to become a prevalent phenomenon in today's world. The language of fear stands out in news reports and in everyday language. Even daily issues are addressed through a narrative of fear: 'politics of fear', 'fear of crime', 'fear of terrorism', 'fear of the future'. All of this suggests the cultural significance of fear in today's world.

While political debates appear to be firmly couched in a language of fear, ordinary people seem to make sense of their experiences through a narrative of fear, whether living in war zones, developing economies or in peaceful, yet equally uncertain, post-industrial societies. Fear is not simply associated with high-profile catastrophic threats, such as terrorist attacks, global warming, AIDS or other potential pandemics; most of us are preoccupied daily with the numerous 'quiet fears' of everyday life.

But fear is not only a societal issue – it is also an interesting biological and neurological phenomenon. Fear response (most notably fleeing, hiding, or freezing) has played an important part in evolution since appropriate behavioral responses to fear serve survival. It is thus interesting to see which biological processes take place when we fear. Hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol are released into the blood stream, the heart rate accelerates, the pupils dilate and the blood pressure increases. Furthermore, the neurological phenomenon of the post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) demonstrates the fact that fear can leave lasting traces on the brain. Since fear is such a pre-conscious, powerful emotion, it has a pre-rational way of framing and affecting our thinking. The political and sociological implications of this neurological process can be seen in the way some politicians use the fear of 'others' to rally people behind them.

Fear is often examined in relation to specific contemporary issues, not least some of those listed above. Despite its ubiquity in culture and history, it seems rarely to be considered as a topic in its own right. A recent increase in studies of the emotions has helped reignite interest in the topic, yet the broad presence and role of fear in contemporary society continues to be neglected in the social sciences. Although it has preoccupied the attention of philosophers, psychiatrists and theologians, it has still been comparatively neglected in other fields, even if present in the influential literature on risk.

Medical and psychological practitioners know that fear is an emotional state accompanied by very specific bodily sensations. Fear has furthermore fascinated and preoccupied many other contemporary thinkers. It has also been thought about and explained in many different ways throughout history. Have some societies been more fearful than others? Did our current preoccupation with fear emerge out of the previous century's age of anxiety? From a biological and neurological perspective, what happens in our brains when we fear? When does fear make sense? Why are some people more prone to fear and anxiety than others? How have we come to understand fear specifically, and how does its normalization today aid our survival (if so)? Finally, how did it become such an important, perhaps even defining emotion of our own times?

## **From local to global engagement**

'Topic of the Year' activities are organized locally. Activities could range from a single event to a series of events, such as a public lecture or discussion, a workshop/seminar/conference or a lecture series at your Institute. All kinds of activities, from small to large, from one afternoon to a continuing activity are possible. Institutes could consider inviting colleagues/fellows from other institutes as speakers or guests. Some institutes might think of a joint activity with another/other member institute(s).

To create a space for intercommunication and inspiration between Institutes on the 'Topic of the Year', we encourage members to share information on ToY events to be posted at the UBIAS website. Please send this information by email to Lena Bering, [lber@aias.au.dk](mailto:lber@aias.au.dk) to be published under the headline of the Topic of the Year. The format should be up to 5 lines describing time and place for the event, its format, and of course which network institute it is assigned.