

## **The Anxiety Culture Research Project, now on its way ...**

Consolidated by an initial workshop convened at Columbia University on February 23, 2018, the Anxiety Culture (AC) Project is now on the path to a potentially fruitful collaboration—a global collaboration across different disciplines, the mission of which is to stimulate a common research agenda that would aim to find new ways to better understand the big problems that now confront the world. To the understanding of the project founders, Anxiety Culture is required as a key term for any research approach to the pressing issues of our time. In the domains focused within the AC Project—climate, health, migration and technology—we all see ourselves, in a global world or as citizens of different states, exposed to fears, dangers, and threats. But to what extent is the awareness or sensation of a world full of anxieties directly related to the actual circumstances of life, and to what extent do these anxieties help us to solve the real problems?

We live in a world of familiar interpretation patterns that have largely lost their effectiveness to explain or understand rapid change. Spontaneously, our immediate thoughts are that fears must be overcome and crises have to be coped with. But that is exactly how we are no longer able to find solutions in our world of today. Whether we like it or not, we are already accustomed to living in a permanent anxiety culture in which worries and concerns go deeper and last longer than in former times, and in which, on the other hand, fear and dread are increasingly losing their effect. This is an apparent contradiction, and yet precisely the reality in which we find ourselves living. Public life in our societies is characterized by propagating moods that link a high sensitivity of the individual with the intent of common rational behavior. Our patterns of interpretation and meaning are often surprisingly related to affective states of mind but, at the same time, they are locked in rationalistic categories of thinking. Economics and politics have long responded to these ambivalent conditions, but unfortunately in a way that often proves to have devastating consequences. Thus, as we take a closer look at labor-market developments, the financial crises, the undermining of democratic institutions and civil society, and the increasing phenomenon of political populism, we see that with regard to all these issues, we are driven not only by facts, but also by special mechanisms of public discourse. The mass media have recognized this since long ago and use it for their own purposes. But Anxiety Culture goes far beyond their sphere of influence. It starts with the individuals and translates into the many communities in which each of us lives: family, school, work, and leisure activities.

The Humanities—in cooperation with the Sciences—therefore have to make Anxiety Culture a focus of their scientific approach. In the traditional humanist fields of research, there are indeed many opportunities already given to think about the nature of Anxiety Culture, to analyze it adequately, and to draw conclusions for further scientific research and its application to social life. The dimension of this new research challenge is exactly what the AC Project seeks to explore from the perspective of different disciplines. This new approach starts from recognizing that what is happening in our societies and how they are developing and drastically changing is widely perceived as a scenario of threats and dangers, presented as such in our public discourses and represented in our actions. In fact, we must learn to cope not only with real threats, but also with discursively mediated threat scenarios—for or it is precisely the latter that determine more and more our actions in the public and private spheres. What matters is more than regulating the misdirection of fears. We have come to a point where our life is so strongly marked by the Anxiety Culture that some parts of our society even tend to accept “alternative facts” and to live in a post-truth reality. But the Anxiety Culture is not just negative. It has become an important part of our everyday life experience and gives us the scale for evaluating many problems. Thus, we are all strongly influenced by social moods and personal uncertainties. In this world of complex experience, we must assign a suitable place in our lives to emotions and anxieties. But accepting an affective state of mind, and not only factual argumentation as the basis of our acting in public space, is something we are

not used to. And it is surely one of the greatest challenges in a mainly rationalist Western world that does not want to give too much space to the alternative of spiritual concepts.

Thus, the Anxiety Culture, for being real and complex in our societies and for having reached a personal level of life experience in our social communities, definitely deserves to be the focus of interpretation in a large international and interdisciplinary research project.

### **How to affiliate your research to the Anxiety Culture Project?**

The project has started as an interdisciplinary attempt to focus on the main problem fields of our “risk society” (Ulrich Beck) and “liquid modernity” (Zygmunt Baumann) from the angle of the Anxiety Culture, which has become a relevant experience in modern times. Initiated and launched in 2015, in close collaboration between internationally renowned researchers, universities and other academic institutions, the project is at present in an advanced developmental state that requires clarifications on three levels:

#### **1) The theoretical definition of a commonly accepted, yet flexible analytical framework, referring to the concept of “Anxiety Culture”.**

The main task of this conceptual framework is to establish an innovative and comprehensive way to analyze our modern world with regard to its most relevant and permanent problem fields comprising climate change and its consequences, population health and social well-being, migration phenomena, automation and digitalization, social insecurity, political and economic instabilities, and others. Public and private debates on these current issues are triggering many forms of anxiety, ranging from personal worries, individual uncertainties to social fears and forms of panic generated by some media discourses. Thus, Anxiety Culture is a partly affective way to react to the unsolved challenges of our rapidly evolving modern world in public space—including politics—with a most relevant impact on individual lives that not only have to cope with public narratives of threats and dangers, but in many cases even come close to personal forms of anxiety disorder.

On the other hand, Anxiety Culture is also directly related to the empirical facts of profound technological changes that are taking place in our times, due to the new realities of a more and more digitalized, automated, and globalized world. The innovative approach of the Anxiety Culture concept is analyzing in detail all the facets of modern technology with regard to their impact on new demands for security and stability in our liquid times, taking into account that technological change does not only provoke anxieties, but, at the same time, also is the only means to restore confidence in the future. In the light of the Anxiety Culture, technological options thus have to be negotiated and evaluated and understood in a completely new way within our societies, in order to find entry points into public policies, with education playing a crucial part in this process.

#### **2) The research guidelines as a basis for defining and analyzing topics relating to Anxiety Culture in the different fields of scientific and humanist research.**

The following selection of questions is of particular relevance for these guidelines, even if it does not represent an exhaustive list. Some of the questions already indicate a way to research foci:

- a) How does research in your discipline take notice of special forms of social crisis or main problem fields in everyday life? Are specialists in your field aware of anxieties playing a crucial role in

reaction to incidents or developments that are being interpreted as threats and dangers in public life?

- b) What is the best definition of personal anxiety and its social relevance according to your research tradition? Are you dealing more with uncertainties or clearly defined fears?
- c) In a society characterized by individualization, what would be your research approach to personal behavior patterns of individuals who are driven by anxieties and uncertainties? Do you interpret personal behavior driven by anxiety on a social level as a form of relevant acting, which your research has to take into account? Or are you looking, from your perspective, mainly on the psychological side of personal behavior in reaction to technological development?
- d) If you think of possibilities to initialize a special research project on Anxiety Culture within your field, to which extent would it be data-based or data-driven? Are there data sets of previous research work that could be useful for being reexamined in an analytic approach of the Anxiety Culture?
- e) Do you think that your research domain is methodologically prepared to investigate aspects of Anxiety Culture? Do you think it is necessary to modify or complete methodologies within your field for this purpose, or would you rather see a demand for totally new methodologies? Could you imagine collaborations on the basis of methodological exchange with other disciplines?
- f) Based on available data, how will the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning transform the employment landscape in advanced economies? What policies could be put into place (in the areas of education, employment and job training, social protection, etc.) to mitigate against potential job losses?
- g) Does the widespread use of “big data” by private companies bring potential threats to individual freedom and privacy? What is the precise nature of those threats? Can existing legal tools be reinforced to better protect the right to privacy?
- h) How will technological advances impact the cost and delivery of healthcare? Will technological advances such as 3D printing of molecules lower the cost of prescription medications? Can personalized medicine (supported, for example, by stem cells used to make personalized models of organs on which to test new drugs) be made widely accessible? What policies should be put into place to ensure that medical advances are made accessible and benefit communities equitably?
- i) How can technology be harnessed to support efforts to preserve less commonly taught languages? Based on existing innovative practices, how effective are technological learning tools (based on videoconferencing, electronic reading companions, etc.) in enhancing and spreading opportunities for the learning of less commonly taught languages?
- j) Based on existing data, what is the effect of online and social media news consumption on the general public's political opinions and understanding of current affairs? How effective are educational tools and programs aimed at instilling “media literacy” skills among the young? What policies could be put into place to develop discernment in news media consumption at an early age?

**3) The formulation of special research questions linked to Anxiety Culture from the perspective of the collaborating disciplines.**

Is there a special research project on Anxiety Culture in the context of your discipline, or in collaboration with others, that you are interested in undertaking? Can you formulate special research interests from your point of view?

We invite all those who participated in the initial workshop to grant us their support in further moves to build up and populate the AC project and to reach out to other potential collaborators. We promise to keep you apprised of our upcoming efforts on fundraising and the preparation of grant applications, and we are grateful for any constructive feedback and suggestions you may have.

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