

# Western Modern Legacy and the Covid-19 Outbreak

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to investigate the role of anxiety as an emotional state frequently identified as the most characteristic of the history of modern Europe, and of the 'Global North'. Starting from an assessment of the main supporters of this interpretation in social theory – such as the risk society approach of Ulrich Beck, and the role of expert knowledge in Anthony Giddens – the article discusses the current relevance and limitations of this well-established notion. The second part applies this discussion to the role of anxiety in the recent Covid-19 outbreak, and more specifically with regard to its relations with trust in scientific knowledge. Even though Covid-19 has been a global pandemic, this emergency can reveal some cultural and historical characteristics of European anxiety in the geo-cultural map of emotions.

**Keywords:** Anxiety; Covid-19; Sociology

## INTRODUCTION

### A Geo-Cultural Contextualization of Anxiety

With some notable exceptions, social sciences haven't paid specific attention to anxiety; other closer emotions like anger or fear, but also love and compassion, are more often investigated as mobilizing factors, in individual also as collective action. Nonetheless, anxiety may be a common spirit, frequently present in lifestyle, often liable for physical discomfort, and correlated not only with contingent situations but also with cultural dispositions and orientations.

Anxiety is a slippery emotion. Also as being a buzzword, it's a standard everyday experience, pervasive and sometimes unnoticed due to its low intensity, or its continuity, compared to other emotional upheavals. Anxiety isn't necessarily a short lived state, or the emotional response to a situation. It's different from fear, as a selected and present threat: anxiety doesn't stem from a selected object and it's not something from which one can escape as within the case of a short lived danger. It also can be a permanent emotional condition, a background spirit, typically aroused by moments of uncertainty, unpredictability, judgement, competition, necessity to require a choice. In many situations, anxiety may be a typical response to worry, and within the psychological literature it's described as an amorphous 'emotional disorder', a scarcity of equilibrium and serenity subject to clinical diagnosis. Overall, anxiety is taken into account to be a spirit of worry, apprehension, and concern, vaguely related to feelings of menace.

In Western culture, anxiety is additionally a typically future-oriented emotion, and it's correlated to the sensation of trust since

they both have a relation with the openness of the longer term typical of modernity. As Giddens noted, future-oriented modernity fosters trust in expert systems, but also reflexivity, criticism and anxiety towards them. Modernity recognizes that the longer term is unknowable, while at an equivalent time it's seen as a neighbourhood of possibility, thus hospitable risk calculation, self-monitoring of worldwide risks, and self-reflexivity towards expert knowledge, producing an anxiety associated with the tendency to trust nobody and become a self-expert by drawing on contradictory sources of data.

### Modernity as the Age of Anxiety

In the cultural geography of emotions, anxiety has been considered because the commonest Western emotion. It's rooted within the history of European modernity, in its conceptualizations of subjectivity and autonomy, in its relationships with secularism and science, in its teleological and eschatological relationship with the longer term, and with its ambitions to regulate risks. Certainly, this doesn't mean that other cultures, other places and other historical experiences aren't concerned by anxiety and distress, but there is an elective affinity with Western modernity and anxiety.

## CONCLUSION

As a sort of intimate enemy, anxiety has been considered the inconspicuous but pervasive emotional state of Western modernity, with its ambitions of governmentality, control, planning, and it's doubtful trust in expert systems. The critique of modernity developed in Western philosophical thought of the

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twentieth century was often intertwined with the analysis of an emotional state of anxiety about the failures, contradictions or excessive ambitions of the modern project. Since then, the ironic nihilism of postmodern discourse or the analysis of the complexity, uncertainty and risks related to globalization processes have also explicitly addressed the question of anxiety. Whilst at the beginning of modern society anxiety was mainly a private feeling of subjective malaise, in postmodern and post-industrial societies, it is a collective emotion based on the awareness of the potential catastrophes that we are generating.

As a sort of intimate enemy, anxiety has been considered the inconspicuous but pervasive spirit of Western modernity, with its ambitions of governmentality, control, planning, and its doubtful trust in expert systems. The critique of modernity developed in Western philosophical thought of the 20th century was often intertwined with the analysis of an spirit of hysteria about the failures, contradictions or excessive ambitions of the fashionable

project. Since then, the ironic nihilism of postmodern discourse or the analysis of the complexity, uncertainty and risks associated with globalization processes have also explicitly addressed the question of hysteria. Whilst at the start of recent society anxiety was mainly a personal feeling of subjective malaise, in postmodern and post-industrial societies, it's a collective emotion supported the notice of the potential catastrophes that we are generating.

For of these reasons, the emotional consequences of Covid-19 will probably have an impression on the modern Western legacy and its relationship with anxiety, reinforcing the ambivalent relations with expert knowledge and techno science, the obsessive anticipations of risk, the need of individualized responses to uncertainty, the disenchantment and inconstancy in reference to assertions of truth, and therefore the specialise in immanence and contingency instead of on planning futures. With a worldwide reverberation, the 'scars of the spirit' left by the pandemic crisis confirm the centrality of hysteria because the main emotional legacy of Western modernity.