

The Umbrella: Bodies, Deportment and Geopolitics

Written by Klaus Dodds

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KLAUS DODDS, OCT 10 2014

The umbrella, and at times barely noticed, when not required in the absence of rain heavy or otherwise, has enjoyed an elevated profile in Hong Kong over the last few weeks. Accompanied by the sobriquet, Umbrella Revolution, protestors have been filmed and photographed holding their umbrellas in order to prevent the worst effects of police officers firing pepper spray at the crowds. While not as infallible as a source of facial protection, the umbrella both as material object and representational symbol is noteworthy.

It is not the first time that protestors have used the umbrella in a way that its original designers might have intended. In Latvia, in 2007, for instance, the umbrella was symptomatic of popular unrest and discord with the current administration. More recently, the Occupy movement (and the Blockupy movement as well) embraced the open umbrella as a practical defense against anti-protests measures such as water and chemical-based sprays. And when protestors have come 'armed' with umbrellas of all shapes, sizes and colours, the resultant images of protestors and their umbrellas has invited both admiration and appreciation by others, especially on social media.

There are other aspects, however, to the umbrella that might also connect up to the relationship between objects and corporality, and their relevance to geopolitics and IR. Let me develop three points, albeit briefly. First, we might reflect on how the umbrella is actually held by humans, and how the simple act of holding the umbrella might be politically and geographically significant. There is a certain deportment associated with the umbrella; both formal and everyday expectations about how the umbrella is used (we expect holders to ensure that they do not hit others as they pass them by in the street for example) and even who is holding it? Should a head of state, when acting in an official capacity, be expected to hold his or her umbrella? What happened when a president is seen, as was President Obama in May 2013, having an umbrella being held over his head by a nearby US marine soldier outside the White House? Critics complained that the president was treating the marine like his 'butler' and quickly debate ensued about the protocols regarding umbrella holding. Race, class and gender were enrolled in these debates as it became apparent that female marines could be expected to hold umbrellas for political dignitaries but their male colleagues could not. The idea that Obama was treating the marine like a 'butler' rather than a member of the US armed forces raised the intriguing issue as to whether it was not only demeaning to that individual (he is not a 'butler') but perhaps even troubling in terms of masculinity (a 'real man' would not hold an umbrella for another man). And finally, was it more problematic for some critics that an African-American president was the one having the umbrella being held over his head by a white man rather than the other way around?

Second, does it matter if the holder of the umbrella appears to be struggling to hold it in a way that maximizes its utility as a protector against the rain? When President George W. Bush was photographed leaving the White House helicopter in 2004 at Andrews Air Force Base holding an up-turned umbrella (due to a sudden gust of wind), it appeared to some observers to crystalize a view of the president as incompetent and hapless, both as president and commander in chief. The umbrella embodied and emboldened. Its unruly nature mattered. So when objects fail to perform in the manner intended by their user, it can and does become a matter of potential significance. While not life-threatening in this presidential context, its failure to 'behave' because of a combination of wind and rain stimulated an intriguing assessment of how the human agency of President Bush failed to accommodate the non-human.

Finally, the umbrella can also be a powerful material object when not even opened. Thus far we have assumed that the umbrella, whether operated successfully or not, is being put to use regarding the weather. But the umbrella, when

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sealed, has in many cases a pointed edge. The edge can conceal and reveal. Like the handle, it is capable of being adapted and customized by assassins and spies alike. The death of a Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov in 1978 while waiting on Waterloo Bridge remains a stark reminder of how the umbrella can be a deadly object. While the perpetrator was never captured, it became a cause celebre and indicative, at least to British and western audiences, of Cold War ingenuity and ruthlessness. Who would have thought that the umbrella could be used with such deadly consequences? Or more aptly, were British and western audiences more accustomed to witnessing fictional secret agents such as James Bond using such deadly gadgets?

As others scholars in geopolitics and IR such as Laura Wilcox (2014) have noted, the role of bodies and objects in the making and remaking of world politics continues to deserve our attention, including the ways in which human and non-human agency combine to facilitate, to frustrate, to animate, and to re-engineer the umbrella.

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Klaus Dodds is Professor of Geopolitics in the department of Geography at Royal Holloway University of London. He has published widely on geopolitics and the polar regions, and plays a key role in the MSc in Geopolitics and Security. He is author of many books, including *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP 2014) and *International Politics and Film* (Columbia University Press 2014 with Sean Carter).