Emotion and Dystopian Idealism in Security Studies

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The recent forum on emotions and world politics in the journal *International Theory* is a welcome development for the field of International Relations. The contributors helpfully remind us that emotions research in IR remains hampered by a number of deeply embedded assumptions, such as the belief that emotions are only private and personal phenomena, or the belief there is a sharp dichotomy between emotion and rationality. Critically assessing these assumptions is important not only because it highlights what the discipline gets 'wrong' in its picture of world politics, but because it illuminates how current theories help to propagate such distortions.

In this brief intervention I focus on an additional assumption concerning emotion, one which permeates the subfield of security studies. Here I am referring to the widely shared belief in the ubiquity of fear in the politics of security. While this association is historically rooted in Hobbesian accounts of anarchy it has a distinct contemporary form. Fear, we are told by a variety of figures, permeates the politics of security and is consistently and successfully marshalled by political elites, security professionals, and bureaucrats to sustain new images of threat which lead to an ever broadening security agenda. Fear, whether over predatory great powers, immigrant minorities, or infectious diseases, facilitates securitization. As a latent social resource collective fears always appear to be waiting patiently in the margins of discourse until they are easily and unproblematically deployed in a security argument.

These kinds of arguments radically underplay the fragility and contingency of political fears. As forms of collective embodied judgment political fears are produced and sustained only through social interactions. As I have argued elsewhere the memories, traumas, practices, rituals, symbols, and other cultural resources which sustain political fears are always open to contestation and destabilization (Van Rythoven, forthcoming). Yet in security studies the logic of fear as a relatively settled and stable substance which can be drawn upon to serve narrow, instrumental purposes enjoys wide appeal. The consequence is a particular form of dystopian theory, a distorting idealism which ignores both the empirical fragility of fears, as well as the often dispersed power struggles which shape this emotion in a multitude of differing ways.

To appreciate the breadth of this assumption in the field it is useful to begin by looking at two highly disparate figures: Stephen Walt and Didier Bigo. Walt has become the essential flag bearer for a conventional neorealism that continues to define the mainstream of security studies in America. Bigo's contribution to the so-called 'Paris School' has made him a central figure in critical security studies which has grown exponentially outside of the heartland of American IR (CASE, 2006). While both hold sharply divergent understandings of security, method, and the purposes of its study they are surprisingly similar in their view of the relationship between fear and threat construction. Nowhere is this more evident than in the close resemblance between their respective figures of the 'threat monger' and 'the manager of unease'.

The figure of the threat monger is most evident in Walt's contemporary work, especially his popular writings for *Foreign Policy.* Here the concern is not with the international system, anarchy, the balance of power, nor any other of the concepts normally associated with neorealist theory. Instead the most pressing issue is the persistent and pernicious practice of threat inflation. The dangers facing the national security apparatus in western states are vastly overblown. Everything from the safety of the Olympics, to the danger of international terrorism, to the neologism of cyber security, to the threat of global warming are vastly blown out of proportion, especially relative to the traditional danger of interstate conflict (Walt, 2012, 2010, 2009b). Instead of objectively discerning national security demands

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from the material distribution of power, the United States' security agenda has become bloated with a host of inflated threats. In Walt's view "[o]ne reason Americans exaggerate security fears is the existence of an extensive cottage industry of professional threatmongers, who deploy a well-honed array of arguments to convince us that we are in fact in grave danger" (2009a). Through a variety of argumentative techniques threat mongers are able to engender fear in the American public over the threat of some dangerous 'other'. Such "tried-and-true methods do not work all of the time, of course, but they are undeniably effective" (Ibid). Here fear receives little scrutiny. It is simply a latent social resource activated by the discursive performance of the monger which helps wins audience approval.

Bigo's (2002:66) examination of the security profession, "with its ethos of secrecy and concern for the management of fear or unease", bears more than a passing resemblance to Walt's threat monger. His concern with those who work in the professional field of security, spanning from government bureaucracies, police, intelligence agencies, militaries, and their private partners, comes as a reaction to earlier approaches narrowly focused on highly publicized security speech acts. The social production of danger, Bigo argues, is in part sustained by the "sense of the routines, the day-to-day practices, of the bureaucracies" who produces both insecurity over policy fields like migration and the techniques of governance to respond (Ibid, 73). Like Walt's monger however, this task is only made possible through the deft generation and management of fear. Security professionals partake in a broader discursive formation where "the word *immigration* becomes a term for catalyzing fears or misgivings about the economic, social, and political development of Western countries. It becomes a fixer of frights and confusions about national cultural identities as well as of weaknesses of solidarity mechanisms" (Ibid, 79 emphasis original). It is through this capacity to affix specific frights to distinct programs of governance, especially through institutionalized routines, that the securitization of issues like migration is possible.

The differences between Walt and Bigo cannot be underplayed. For Walt the polemical description of the monger is necessary because these actors recklessly inflate threats above and beyond what is objectively reasonable based upon the current international environment. Bigo rejects the very framing of threat inflation as it presupposes some mythical baseline from which 'true' assessments of threat can be discerned. Security issues in this view are always historically situated reflections of particular interests and modes of governance.

Yet this deep philosophical divide over threat construction is what makes the convergence between the figure of the threat monger and the manager of unease all the more striking. Both Walt and Bigo envisage a collection of actors whom, with predictable and institutionalized regularity, engage in a series of discursive moves which couple latent fears with a distinct security agenda. These fears, which never seem to be in short supply, are amplified, managed, and molded to the instrumental purposes of these actors. Both present an array of techniques, such as the creation of categories of identity, which can be used to circulate fear, or as Walt pithily puts it "[h]ow to scare your fellow citizens for fun and profit" (2009a). Though the nuances surrounding these figures differ when it comes to their central role in leveraging fear to produce a collectively shared image of threat they are the same. The manager of unease *is* the threat monger and vice versa.

This is a permissive view of threat construction. Practices of securitization are not simply relatively frequent occurrences, they also achieve a high rate of success. In the strongest form of this view the deliberative, rule-driven, liberal order of world politics is constantly abridged by the emergency politics of security. This distinctly dystopian view is sustained by both the assumed ubiquity of fear and its unproblematic instrumentalization.

The concept of dystopia employed here is best understood through its resemblance to earlier critiques of utopianism in IR. These began with E.H. Carr's *Twenty Years Crisis* in which he chastises interwar liberals for a utopian view which grossly exaggerated the ease and possibility of international peace. More recently Samuel Barkin has revived the concept in his critique of contemporary American constructivism whose progressive view of the spread of humanitarian and democratic norms is eerily reminiscent of Carr's utopian liberals (2003:332-336). The utopian label functions as a shorthand for highlighting two fundamental defects in thinking about world politics. The first is empirical. For Barkin the norms that are the locus of liberal constructivism "are accepted largely uncritically as good ones, as are the elements of international civil society involved in spreading these norms" (Ibid, 335). There is little empirical interest in 'bad' norms or what might be considered malignant forms of international civil society. Carr explicitly positions empirical 'reality' as the opposite to utopianism with the latter being "the product of not analysis,

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but of aspiration" (2001[1981]:7). The second feature of this critique concerns the absence of power. On this point Barkin repeats familiar criticisms of liberal norms-centered research: that it fails to consider why certain norms spread and others don't, or why some norms are actively resisted (2003:335). Carr argues the "[f]ailure to recognize that power is an essential element of politics has hitherto vitiated all attempts to establish international forms of government" (2001[1981]:100).

While utopia and reality are often presented as opposing mirror images–especially by Carr–this ignores how political idealism comes in different forms. Dystopianism is a form of political idealism but instead of exaggerating the prospect of liberal progressiveness it exaggerates illiberal regression. Security studies has become dystopian insofar as it has come to fetishize the illiberal character of emergency politics. While utopianism envisions few substantive limits to the expansion of liberal order, the dystopianism of security studies sees few limits on the expansion of the concept of security. Walt's threat monger and Bigo's manager of unease face no limits on invoking emergency politics because of their unparalleled ability to instrumentalize fear.

Yet because this position is fundamentally idealist it is also subject to the same lines of critique as liberal idealism. Empirically there is a wealth of evidence (and common sense) to suggest collective fears are fragile, fugitive, and fickle phenomenon rather than the stable, steady, and settled social resources which can be reliably deployed in a security argument. Wendy Pearlman's rich ethnographic account of the Arab Spring for example, is centered precisely on the breakdown of collective fears over violent reprisal from authoritarian governments. Analogous to the figures discussed above, authoritarian "[p]owerholders [in the Middle East] wielded fear as a tool for survival, enforcing it with security apparatuses and state discourses that warned that the alternative to the regime was chaos or Islamic radicalism" (Pearlman, 2013:393). Pearlman's account of revolution in Tunisia and Egypt is peppered with references to the overcoming or breaking down of fear, something captured in the popular expression "inkasar hajez al-khawf" meaning "The barrier of fear has broken" (Ibid, 388).

Even in instances where a broadly-based collective fear does emerge it may lack the historical durability to sustain any lasting vision of emergency politics. Anxiety within in western countries over the spread of Ebola from West Africa reached a fevered pitch in the Fall of 2014. When asked in October 65% of Americans said they were concerned about the possibility of a nationwide epidemic (Washington Post-ABC News Poll, 2014). Citing Ebola as "a potential threat to global security" the Obama administration deployed 3,000 military personnel to West Africa (Mason and Harding Giahyue, 2014). Yet by November declining media coverage, eroding public interest, and empty congressional meetings suggested popular anxieties over the disease had largely evaporated (Koren, 2014; Ferris, 2014). By December the Obama administration was left struggling to revitalize anxieties over Ebola to sustain a security response. In a plea for a further a further $6 billion of emergency funding to maintain the response Obama urged that the crisis "can't get caught up in normal politics" (Hughes, 2014).

The fact that political actors so often struggle and strain to preserve the underlying sense of anxiety and crisis surrounding a security issue points to a precarious set of power relations surrounding emotions. To be clear, scholars like Walt and Bigo offer very rich conceptions of power within their research. Walt's neorealism carries an explicit view of material state power even if this view is difficult to square with his popular writings focused on security discourses. Bigo offers a much richer conceptualization of power which draws on both the constitutive force of speech acts as well as the positional authority of the security profession (2002:73-74). While these forms of power are important they do not necessarily shape collective emotions which can be situated in a much more dispersed sets of cultural practices. Consider, for example, Stephen Hawking's recent claim that the emergence of artificial intelligence could threaten humanity. This claim likely resonated well in societies such as the United States where films and texts in popular culture have long envisioned autonomous robots as dangerous (Brasor, 2014). Contrast this with how "Japan's tendency to imbue machines with sentient qualities reflects certain native religious precepts" (Ibid). Machines which may be culturally identified as objects of fear in one society may be objects of comfort, sentimentality, and even happiness in another. In certain cases pre-existing cultural practices may sharply circumscribe the power of authoritative speech to generate collective fears.

Characterizing security studies as dystopian for its disregard of the power relations and empirics surrounding emotions may seem questionable. Such accusations of idealism often come to be understood as a form of insult

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(Barkin, 2003:332). Yet given how these views of fear have such broad and longstanding status within security studies a provocation, in a sense, is necessary. There is however, an additional value to this framing of dystopia. If any prolonged scrutiny of emotions finds the dystopian view of security studies to be unsustainable, then it raises questions over what kinds of worlds do collective emotions in world politics actually contribute to? The answers to this question are bound to be more complex than simplistic utopias or dystopias, but they also promise to be far more interesting.

Notes

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