

Emotions in IR: The 'Dog That Did Not Bark'

Written by K.M. Fierke

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K.M. FIERKE, FEB 20 2015

The role of fear in international relations has been the 'dog that did not bark'; the silences surrounding it, and the absence of direct attention, speak loudly (Booth and Wheeler 2008: 63). Fear has often driven states to war (Crawford 2000: 120-3). It has also been constitutive of security dilemmas, the existential condition of uncertainty that arises from the misperception of an other's intention (Booth and Wheeler 2008). So why the silence? The inhibition has been at least in part methodological; International Relations, as a relatively young field of study, struggling to become a science, has tried to keep messy values or emotions at bay. Assumptions about rationality and rational choice remain central to the study of international relations, although the dichotomy between rationality and emotion, as well as the Cartesian mind/body split, have been destabilized through a series of 'turns,' including the aesthetic, which have turned many assumptions of IR on their head.

The study of emotion in IR has given rise to a number of different debates, although these are still at an early stage. There is a longer history of studying emotion in psychology, social theory and philosophy, in which, among others, difficult questions of how to define emotion and how it differs from affect, have been explored. While building on these debates, the study of emotion in international politics, or any kind of politics, is understandably preoccupied with a question of how one moves from the individual – where emotions are assumed to reside – to some notion of social or collective emotion and the type of influence these emotions potentially have at the international level (see Bleiker and Hutchison 2014). For instance, can a state or any other collective have emotions? The question, while suggesting a levels of analysis problem, actually points to a much larger field, and a muddy one at that.

At the level of the individual body, emotions, such as fear, love, happiness or shame, can be distinguished from some notion of affect, which relates more to the bodily experience of emotion. Individual memory may also play a role in arousing both in any one context. Moving into the social or political realm, all of these remain important but become more complex in so far as the expression of emotion exists in part outside of individual bodies. To grasp the significance, we can start with the individual and move outward. For the individual, the stimulus for an experience of emotion may relate to memory or perceptions of the external world to relationships to others or things that are valued. Most emotions are to some degree relational. Love, shame, joy, humiliation are usually experienced in relation to others. From here we slide gradually into the socially or culturally shared meanings that give rise to emotions and constitute the conditions for meaningfulness beyond the individual. We are not born with a concept of the nation or a memory of past wars or genocide. Most of us learn these as concepts or constructs, rather than through direct experience, and within narratives about the past, which acquire emotional resonance within social, cultural and/or political context. We are socialized to experience the emotions of fear, revulsion or horror that accompany memories of past wars, among others.

Once we accept that individual emotions connect, at the very least, to a larger relational field, which is in large part acquired through socialization, a further question rears its head. Which comes first, the chicken or the egg? Are political emotions the sum of all the individual emotions that constitute a community or do they have a separate ontological status, given they are prior to the individual and a product of socialization? (see Sasley 2011 for a discussion of three ways that emotions inform state behaviour). Can the emotions experienced on 9/11, for instance, be reduced to individual fear or was this fear a byproduct of identity as American or Muslim or human being, and thus connected to place in the world? It may be both. Anyone observing the Twin Towers collapse, even on television, would have experienced some mixture of emotion and affect. But the repetition of the images over and over and over

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again, along with the narrative that came to be attached to the images, transformed the experience into a more political and cultural phenomenon.

That large number of Americans, far from the site of the attacks or any direct danger, experienced symptoms of trauma (Crawford 2013: 122), suggests that the meaning of being American or in America – one a construct of identity and the other of geography – was a social stimulus for fear. The almost global sympathy or empathy at the time, suggested a more spontaneous human response to the suffering of others. Having said this, the magnitude of the global response to 9/11 may also relate to association of the attacks with the world's only superpower, as distinct from the thousands who are victims of political conflict every day. As Judith Butler (2004) has noted, emotions of grief are often circumscribed, drawing boundaries around who should and should not be seen and heard, and who is recognized as having a 'life' and who is not. She asks 'Is our capacity to mourn in global dimensions foreclosed precisely by the failure to conceive of Muslim and Arab lives as lives?' (2004: 7)

The revulsion and/or shame felt several years later at the exposure of the Abu Ghraib photos, were heavily coated in cultural meaning, from the shame associated with sexual humiliation within Islam, to the shame experienced by some Americans who had understood their country to be not merely a military superpower, but a protector of universal human rights. Cultural forms and institutions, such as the media, play a role in mediating emotions and the memories attached to them. Andrew Ross (2014: 4) has demonstrated how emotions are generated through political interaction, which may be magnified by the resonance of events with the past, and diffused through communication technologies, circulating across geographical and cultural contexts, sometimes having unexpected effects on political processes.

One further big question regards the relationship between rationality and emotion. Social science has traditionally made a clear separation between the two, giving preference to the former and trying to keep the latter out of analysis. Orientalist assumptions have often attributed rationality to the West, while identifying emotion with the East. Both assumptions have been questioned within the turn toward emotions. In her recent book, *Reason and Emotion in International Ethics*, Rene Jeffries (2014) questions the assumption that emotions are irrational and demonstrates the role of emotion in making moral judgement and motivating ethical action in relation to international injustices such as global poverty. The philosopher, Martha Nussbaum (2003) also made a powerful argument about emotions as a rational measure of value, and thus an understandable response to loss or gain of loved persons, objects or parts of the self. In this conception, rationality and emotion are directly related, rather than distinct, phenomena. My own work on political self-sacrifice (Fierke 2013) has highlighted the extent to which a loss of value arising from a daily experience of humiliation at the hands of an occupier, and the accompanying loss of independence and sovereignty, can be both the reason for and meaning conveyed by acts of self-sacrifice, in which the circulation of emotion around the dying body potentially contributes to the reconstitution of community. Such acts may be arouse very different emotions in diverse observers, which contributes to contestation over the identity of the agent as a 'martyr' or 'terrorist.'

What one often notices when approaching questions of rationality and emotion at the level of the state is that emotions can be invisible but very powerful, which brings us back to the 'dog that did not bark.' Booth and Wheeler (2008), as well as Lowenthal and Heiman (2008), have looked at the emotions that hide behind the otherwise rational arguments of states. This may be expressed as euphemism, which may dull the emotions surrounding horrific potentials, as noted by Carol Cohn (1987) in discussions of nuclear weapons by defence intellectuals during the Cold War. But language can also be presented in seemingly rational terms, while relying on references that are packed with emotional power, as in the frequent use of Hitler as an analogy in to the dangers posed by other dictators since World War II (Fierke 2015). The argument may be presented in rational narrative, but understanding and 'feeling' this threat as existential relies on a historical memory of who Hitler was and why he posed a threat. Even an otherwise rational reference to an 'other' as 'like Hitler' may trigger a series of associations and a sense of immanent threat and fear, regardless of whether one has had any direct experience with Hitler, or Milosevic or Hussein for that matter. The very same memory may function in very different ways in another context, for instance, for the Palestinians, the Holocaust narratives cast a shadow on memories of Al Nakba, the catastrophic expulsion of Palestinians from their land following the establishment of Israel (Fierke 2014). The point is that we learn through socialization and through life itself what should be a source of various emotions, and not least fear, which tends to be dominant but is not the

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only emotion of relevance to the international sphere (Brown and Penttinen 2013). These emotions are embedded in familiar narratives and, as Crawford (in Bleiker and Hutchison 2014) has highlighted may become institutionalized and thus part of the standard operating procedures of a state, as has been most evident in the securitization of terrorism since 11 September 2011.

This brief exploration has highlighted the extent to which emotions have a social, cultural and political dimension that is pervasive at the international level. Emotion is expressed in diverse ways and is often at the heart of identity construction, contestation and conflict. The negotiation of emotion may also be important for moving out of conflict. For instance, Taryn Shepperd (2013) asked how the United States and China, in three different contexts of escalating tensions, which could easily have spilled over into a larger conflict, managed to de-escalate and establish a new equilibrium. In her argument, the ability to negotiate the emotional dynamics of the conflict, also in relation to their respective populations, was key. The emotional dynamics of conflict often arise from the distinct historical or cultural positions from which different audiences observe or experience international phenomena. The ways in which emotion is negotiated, to the end of exacerbating or ameliorating conflict, whether in traditional diplomatic practice (see Hall 2011) or other sub-state, intrastate or regional or global institutional processes, is an area that is ripe for further research.

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