

Review - Emotions, Politics and War

Written by Federica Caso

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FEDERICA CASO, OCT 26 2015

Emotions, Politics and War

Edited by Linda Åhäll and Thomas Gregory

New York: : Routledge, 2015.

Emotions matter in world politics, and the eclectic mix of essays offered in *Emotions, Politics and War* testifies to it. In this collection, Linda Åhäll and Thomas Gregory have gathered contributions from high profile scholars in the discipline of international Relations (IR) to explore the nexus between emotions, world politics, and war. Last publication of the Routledge Interventions series, the book represents a pivotal intervention in IR debates which, as Neta Crawford notes in the preface, have ignored the politics of emotions. The major contribution of this book lays in the way it helps us thinking different and alternative tools of analysis. It solicits the reader to step outside of the comfort zone of reason, and explore the ephemeral and ethereal of emotions. More importantly, it reminds us that although IR has neglected it, emotions have always been a central aspect of conflict, conflict management, and conflict resolution. As Åhäll and Gregory point out in their introduction, 'Emotions are essential to the way in which conflicts are both thought and fought' (p. 2).

While united in the intent to demonstrate the political dimension of emotions, the contributors have different understandings of what emotions are and how they work in global politics. The first part of the book explores this. In his contribution Brian Massumi (chapter 2), famous for his distinction between affect as a pre-cognitive physical re/action and emotion as the qualification of the affect, analyses pre-emption in the aftermath of 9/11 as affect. As he puts it, 'Hair-trigger action replaces deliberation. Rapid-response tactical capabilities replace considered strategy' (p. 21). In chapter 3, Marysia Zalewski seems to use the terms affect and emotion interchangeably, making them both partake in the same aesthetic epistemology that relies on human senses and experience. Thus, she takes emotions to be a meaning-making tool. For Zalewski, therefore, emotions work politically from an individual perspective. World politics is made sense of also through emotions and personal experiences. Karin Fierke (chapter 4) offers another understanding, taking emotions to be cultural products. She says '[w]hile the same basic emotions are experienced across cultures, culture defines the circumstances which should give rise to emotion' (p. 46). In these terms, emotions acquire their names in a specific cultural setting. Similarly, the response to that emotion is culturally specific. Her cultural approach positions emotions within a web of power relations, for they police how people behave in a certain context. She suggests that emotions are institutionalised in cultures, societies, as well as in global politics. The example she brings is the institutionalisation in international law of human dignity and humiliation in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (p. 50). These different understandings of emotions as distinguished from pre-cognitive affective response, subjective epistemological lens, and social institution exemplify the breath of what emotions are taken to be in the book, but certainly are not the only ones.

Conceptually, we can add more to the taxonomy of emotions that the book offers. While all contributors understand emotions to be political, some make the argument that they are political rather than personal, while others are committed to show that personal emotions are political. In attempting to systematise emotions, Rose McDermott (chapter 8) maintains that 'although each individual may see and hear things in different ways, the process of how sensation translates into perception works remarkably similarly in most healthy people' (p. 101). Emotional responses, according to McDermott's report, shape political responses to voting, risk taking, and behavioural economics in a systematic way. For her, emotions work politically. Similarly, Helen Parr (chapter 12), Jack Holland

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(chapter 13), and Bleiker and Hutchinson (chapter 16) talk about the politicisation of emotions, and of how emotions can be manipulated to make and sustain war (Parr and Holland) or channelled for peace building (Bleiker and Hutchinson). Others like Ty Solomon (chapter 5), Marysia Zalewski (chapter 3), Swati Parashar (chapter 6), and Marjaana Jauhola (chapter 7), show the intrinsic relation between experience, emotions, and politics. Zalewski, Parashar and Jauhola highlight the role of emotions in the research process, for the researcher is certainly not immune to emotions while conducting the research. Having conducted fieldwork research in Sri Lanka and India, Parashar argues that in these contexts some women are led to join violent resistance as a way of expressing and assuaging a range of emotions including anger and fear, and of asserting political subjectivity under conditions of social injustice and political apathy from the government (p. 81). What these contributors have in common is a shared sense of how the body and embodied experiences matter to world politics. Understood in this terms, some chapters of the book make an important contribution to the emerging literature in IR that is taking bodies seriously as locus where international politics is made and shaped.

Apart from the innovative contribution it make in terms of content, concepts, and analytical alternatives, the book presents an array of methodological approaches. Certainly the reader will not be left wondering how to go about doing research on emotions in world politics. The contributors identify a range of emotions including compassion (Julia Welland), boredom (Victoria Basham, and Marjaana Jauhola), and grief (Helen Parr, and Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchinson). Some have used popular culture as method to execute their research, for popular culture can trigger the emotional reaction that activates and sustain the research. This is exemplified by Victoria Basham, (chapter 10), for instance, who notes how the film *Jarhead* (2005) has spurred reflections on boredom in the military, and has helped her to navigate the gender dimension of military boredom. Thomas Gregory (chapter 14) turns to museums and photography to collect data on emotions and war. He selects a highly emotional form of visual representation for his analysis, McCullin's photos of the Vietnam war – the famous photos blamed for having galvanised Americans against that war (p. 186). War photography is also the site of data collection of Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet and Andreja Zevnik (chapter 15). These two chapters concur that war photography is impregnated with emotions, that the emotional responses they generate is culturally specific, and that visual discourse analysis unpacks these both. By understanding the discourse that surrounds the images of war, we can analyse and understand what emotions they mobilise. A particularly innovative methodology – especially for IR – is proposed by Ty Solomon (chapter 5). He introduces the so-called 'new materialism', an approach that sets to bring matter and materiality back to the social science – which has come to be dominated by concerns over language and social construction. As he puts it 'while new materialist approaches do not deny the centrality of language, they do contend that addressing new challenges requires more nuanced ways of thinking about the interweaving of social construction and materiality (p. 62). The virtue of this approach applied to IR is that it allows to explore emotions below the state level, towards 'how bodies become affectively inscribed via collective symbolic processes' (p. 65). Once again, embodied experience is called upon as site to collect and analyse data about emotions in world politics.

A key aspect of the book is its gender component. While not strictly a book on gender and/or feminism, gender and feminist-inspired thinking greatly enrich the book. While the gendered dualism between reason and emotions is increasingly challenged, emotions are still are a very gendered issue. For instance, Parashar notes how women and femininity are associated to emotions, but simultaneously certain emotions such as anger are denied to them (p. 75). Angry women exceed gender norms; thus, she argues, anger is gendered. Basham remarks the gender politics of boredom in the military, and how it works to maintain the military the gendered environment it is. Moments of boredom in war are often filled by male soldiers with discussions about women and sex. These same discussions are foreclosed to women, for they produce the improper woman and female soldier (p. 131). Basham concludes arguing that boredom buttresses heteronormativity in the military. Alison Howell (chapter 11) too has produced an original contribution in this respect. Examining the relation between war and emotions, she argues that war makes emotional labour, as much as emotional labour makes war. War produces mental disabilities, such as post-traumatic stress disorders, which require emotional labour in order to be managed. This emotional labour tends to be performed by family members of the mentally disabled soldiers and veterans, and militaries are producing campaigns to promote and normalise this. In turn this (unpaid) emotional labour is a multiplier force of war efforts, insofar as it maintain the morale of soldiers high (p. 141). Howell states 'militaries harness the unpaid affective labour of "families" in the maintenance of troop strength, and particularly mental health' (p. 148). She argues that the management of the mental health of soldiers is increasingly devolved to the individual soldier, and by addressing the family, it is cast in

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the realm of the private. Because male soldiers are married more often than female soldiers, the language of family and spouses in support of soldiers' mental health really refers to civilian women (p. 148). She powerfully concludes warning that '[n]ew militarised affective economies centered on self-governance and gendered affective labour are taking root precisely in this context of unending war, and of making such war "work"' (p. 151).

The book validates a range of aesthetic methodologies that are in line with the aesthetic turn in IR. Sensations, feelings, bodies, emotions are successfully demonstrated to be crucial sites of analysis of global politics. Emotions shape world politics as much as world politics shapes emotional responses. Within this framework we can probably talk of the world politics-emotions continuum, as it is not necessarily clear where emotions end and world politics starts. As for a great number of edited collections, the major weakness of the book rests in the feeling it produces of wanting more analysis and analytical depth. In fact, the reader might feel that depth is sacrificed in the name of breath. This might feel to be the case particularly about the relation between emotions and war, which features in the title of the book, but certainly could have been delved deeper into. The positive aspect about this, however, is that it encourages the curious reader to take on these unfinished – or better just started – debates on emotions, war, and world politics.

The array of topics that are explored makes the book an excellent resource not only for students and scholars interested in the politics of emotions, but also in feminist and gender analyses of emotions, critical military studies, visual politics, critical security studies, and obviously the aesthetic turn in IR. Being an edited collection, it is a highly recommended reading for those who are yet to be initiated to the study of emotions in world politics. Simultaneously, the nuances of analysis offered make it a compulsory reading for the politics of emotion savvy too.

About the author:

Federica Caso is a PhD candidate at the University of Queensland where she is completing a thesis on the body and the militarisation of western post-conscription societies. She is co-editor of *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies* (E-International Relations, 2015), and her work features in *The Journal of Critical Military Studies* and more recently in the edited volume *Popular Geopolitics: Plotting an Evolving Interdiscipline* (ed. by Saunders and Strukov, Routledge, 2018). You can follow her on Twitter @Federica_Caso.