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Affective Communities and World Politics

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EMMA HUTCHISON, MAR 8 2018

In the past decade the study of emotions in world politics has undergone a radical transformation. While emotions were traditionally considered irrational and capricious individual phenomena that ran counter to effective reasoning, research now convincingly shows that this is not the case. No longer are emotions considered the antithesis of reason and rationality (Elster 1999). Emotions are social and 'relational'; they have a history and are 'a form of world-making' that enables us to find meaning, value and a sense of belonging (Fierke 2013: 92-93). In this way, emotions are pervasive and important social forces that help to constitute individual and collective ways of knowing, being and acting in the global political realm.

For these reasons, and as I suggested in my first instalment on emotions and international relations here in E-IR, emotions are invaluable sources of social and political insight. Studying emotions in world politics is thus essential because it helps us to puzzle together how world politics has come to be as it is today as well as how it could be into the future.

At the same time, a turn to emotions in world politics can do more than shine a brighter light on particular political issues and questions. An appreciation of the social and cultural nature of emotions, and of how social forms of emotion are structured through context and time, points to an understanding of emotions as collective, political phenomena (see Ahmed 2004; Lutz 1988). Significant here is that emotions are part of the social fabric and meanings through which communities – political or otherwise – exist and continue to transform. Emotions cut to the core of how communities are shaped and can be motivated. This is important because it points to the constitution and significance of what I call 'affective communities' in world politics (Hutchison 2016).

What are Affective Communities?

'Affective communities' can be understood to be forms of community distinguished by widely-held and collectively understood forms of feeling. This means that the respective community is constituted – and to an extent unified, at least temporarily – through shared patterns of emotional meaning and understanding. In this sense, it could be said that emotions 'circulate' within and help to cohere the respective community (Fierke 2013: 90-95; Ross 2014). Yet, the emphasis on shared emotional meanings is particularly important: it is through such emotions and how they are simultaneously individually and collectively affectively enacted that a distinctive 'affective' type of community can be constituted. Affective communities are thus necessarily characterized by their emotional underpinnings.

But, how exactly does one identify affective communities? How, and in what circumstances, does such a community exist or take shape? What are some examples?

Affective communities can take shape and be mobilized at all political levels, from the local to the national and the global. There are a range of examples. Arguably the most prominent are national communities that are strengthened by emotions associated with the trauma of war or terrorism. This was the case, for instance, in the United States after the attacks of September 11, 2001 (Edlkins 2002). A similar situation was witnessed with the Australian national community after the October 12, 2002 Bali bombings (Hutchison 2010). But national communities can also be constituted through historic events and legacies. One example would be the inherited emotional dispositions that remain and bind a nation together after often long-term historical violence, grievance and perceived injustice, such as

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that of China and the 'Century of National Humiliation' (Hutchison 2016: 211-238; Wang 2012). Emotions can also be mobilized – that is, 'pulled upon' (Hutchison 2016: 148, 271) – at the global level. Transnational communities, from 'coalitions of the willing' that are formed to better ensure global security to international humanitarian aid communities formed to indiscriminately assist communities in the wake of disaster, can be in part constituted through shared emotional meanings across national borders (Hutchison 2014).

In all of these instances, there are particular social and political processes at play that enable such diverse – as well as overlapping and potentially contradictory – communities and allegiances to take shape.

I argue that to understand the formation of affective communities we need to appreciate the inherent links between emotions, representations and social discourses that enable individuals and collectives to make sense of the world around them. It is through representations that everyday life – and the world – takes on social, emotional meanings for us. This is to say that we each learn and gain emotional intelligence through our own socialization, which is invariably in perpetual conversation with the social environment and communities we exist in. Some scholars have gone so far as to call this our 'emotional habitus' (Scheer 2012; see also in international relations, Bially Mattern 2011). But this is why representations – of pivotal events, such as the trauma of war or terrorism – are particularly central to the collective politics of emotion. Representational practices provide a pathway through which emotions acquire a collective dimension and, in turn, shape social and political agency, behaviours, and policies.

The Significance of Affective Communities in World Politics

But, what exactly does the concept of 'affective communities' bring to our understanding of international relations?

An awareness of the emotional underpinnings of political communities is important because it helps us to understand what motivates and drives political actors. This is as much the case with individuals, such as political leaders or diplomats, as it is with collectives, such as states or social movements. Understanding that emotions lie beneath all political perceptions provides important signals and critical clues as to why particular international actors respond and behave in the ways that they do.

My work has focused primarily on understanding the roles of emotions – and the constitution of such affective communities – in times of trauma. Trauma is, after all, an instance when the affective and emotional dynamics of communities are most apparent. Yet at the same time, the ensuing implications of understanding the links between emotions, community and politics are much broader. Emotions permeate all political events and issues. Individuals and political communities attribute meaning, value and priority to political phenomena by drawing upon socially cultivated affective and emotional dispositions.

Revealing that emotions are situated at the core of political perceptions and behaviours is thus significant because it assists scholars and analysts to puzzle together how particular political situations come to be. While emotions are often hidden and inaudible, neglected and refuted, when uncovered and taken seriously the political insights they provide are invaluable for analyzing politics and policy and for ascertaining what strategy might be best formulated next.

Attributing collective actors with emotions and emotionality can admittedly be challenging. But, to me it is a commonsensical proposition. Once we appreciate the 'situatedness' – the social, contextually bound nature – of emotions, it becomes apparent that communities of all sizes and types provide an anchor to become attached to and potentially motivated by. To claim that political collectives – including nation-states and even international and transnational organizations – act in part on socially attuned emotions is thus merely to invoke the argument that it is exactly within such collective social structures that our emotions take on shape, meaning and value. This is not to claim that emotions within these structures and ensuing communities are homogenous, or that individual allegiances do not overlap to constitute different, intersecting, potentially contradictory 'affective communities'. It is merely to argue that in particular circumstances, and through particular activating representations or frames, emotions can be mobilized in ways that make possible collective, political ends.

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Also, central here is one further point. Emotions are not life-less, static phenomena that wait to be summoned and acted upon. Emotions can be forms of political agency and power. Just as emotions are bound by time and space – by context – they also shift constantly. Emotions can thus be ‘engines of conversion’ (Rosenwein 2006: 18-19). Put differently, how we feel can transform the very meanings and social spaces that emotions emerge from, thereby making ‘emotions themselves the causes of their own transformation’ (Rosenwein 2006: 197). It is in this way that emotions possess political power: emotions can be summoned in service of the status quo, for what may be for the better or for the worse, or they can help to affect political change.

An appreciation of how such collective, communal emotions operate has in this way direct implications for how scholars and practitioners engage and try to resolve some of the world’s most pressing political, security, and ethical problems. Just as particular emotions can become entrenched and reinforce antagonistic political standpoints, emotions can also be sites of resistance and can help to enact positive political transformation.

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