Understanding emotions in world politics: reflections on method

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Abstract

Although emotions play a significant role in world politics they have so far received surprisingly little attention by international relations scholars. Numerous authors have emphasised this shortcoming for several years now, but strangely there are still no systematic inquiries into emotions nor even serious methodological discussions about how one would go about doing so. This article explains this gap by the fact that much of international relations scholarship is conducted in the social sciences. Such inquiries can assess emotions up to a certain point, as illustrated by empirical studies on psychology and foreign policy and constructivist engagements with identity and community. But conventional social science methods cannot understand all aspects of phenomena as ephemeral as those of emotions. Doing so would involve conceptualising the influence of emotions even when and where it is not immediately apparent. The ensuing challenges are daunting, but at least some of them could be met by supplementing social scientific methods with modes of inquiry emanating from the humanities. We advance three propositions that would facilitate such cross-disciplinary inquiries: 1) the need to accept that research can be insightful and valid even if it engages unobservable phenomena, and even if the results of such inquiries can neither be measured nor validated empirically; 2) the importance of examining processes of representation and communication, such as visual depictions of emotions and the manner in which they shape political perceptions and dynamics; and 3) a willingness to consider alternative forms of insight, most notably those stemming from aesthetic sources, which, we argue, are particularly suited to capture emotions. Taken together, these propositions highlight the need for a more open-minded and sustained communication across different fields of knowledge.
Understanding emotions in world politics: reflections on method

ROLAND BLEIKER AND EMMA HUTCHISON*

INTRODUCTION
Emotions play an obvious and omnipresent role in world politics.1 The ensuing implications are particularly evident in the context of transnational communications. Consider how images of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, broadcast ad infinitum around the world, have had a decisively emotional impact on how people perceive issues of security and national identity. Many of the subsequent political actions, from the swift US-led wars of response in Afghanistan and Iraq to the suspension of basic civil rights and the legitimisation of torture, would not have been possible without the highly emotional impact of 11 September and the equally emotional governmental appeal to defend the world of good against the forces of evil. But fear and hatred are not the only emotions that play an important role in world politics. Empathy and compassion, for instance, can be just as influential. Look at the unprecedented level of transnational solidarity that emerged in response to the tsunami that devastated parts of East and South Asia in 2004. Governments and individual citizens around the world donated so
generously at least in part because they were emotionally affected by the shocking images of the disaster and the suffering it caused.

While central to many aspects of world politics, the role of emotions has received surprisingly little attention in international relations scholarship. Fear, for instance, is pivotal to realist theorising of security dilemmas, but few authors explicitly identify this emotion, let alone examine it systematically. The major exception is a long tradition of exploring the role of psychology in foreign policy. But here too emotions have not been appreciated fully, in part because they are mostly seen as ‘deviations from rationality’, as factors that could explain misperceptions.2

An increasing number of international relations scholars now highlight—and lament—this strange lack of attention paid to the role of emotions. Jonathan Mercer and Neta Crawford were among the first to make this point. The former did so in 1996, in an insightful conference paper that has unfortunately remained unpublished.3 The latter reinforced this message four years later in one of the most respected and widely read disciplinary journals.4 The reaction to Mercer’s and Crawford’s appeal has been puzzling and revealing, but not for the reasons one would expect. There was little objection to their arguments. Instead, some of the discipline’s most senior scholars started to acknowledge the political significance of emotions. Robert Jervis, who has played a key role in examining the role of perception and misperception in world politics, admitted recently that his early neglect of emotion was a ‘major blunder’.5 Richard Ned Lebow, another leading American scholar, emphasises that the notion of an autonomous and rational individual is ‘a fiction of the Enlightenment’, arguing, instead, that emotions are ‘absolutely central’ to world politics, most notably to understanding how and why states and individuals

cooperate with each other.\textsuperscript{6} Across the Atlantic the situation is no different. Christopher Hill and Andrew Linklater, two senior scholars in the UK, acknowledge the crucial role of ‘feeling and intuition’ in decision-making\textsuperscript{7} and deplore that the study of emotions in world politics is still ‘in its infancy’.\textsuperscript{8}

But more than half a decade after Mercer’s and Crawford’s compelling call to take emotions seriously there has not yet been a systematic scholarly inquiry into the issues at stake. There have not even been serious discussions about how one could go about doing so. This absence is puzzling for two reasons. First, because scholarly debates on method play a central role in conventional international relations scholarship. One would thus have expected an equally sustained methodological debate on how to investigate emotions. Second, because just about every philosopher considered central to the tradition of international relations scholarship, from Thucydides to Niccolo Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith, has engaged the role of emotions in a detailed manner. Numerous disciplines, from psychology to sociology, have picked up and carried on these debates, but not so students of international relations.

The main purpose of this article is twofold: 1) to explain the strange absence of discussion about how to study emotions and world politics; and 2) to advance suggestions about how to cultivate an intellectual attitude that may rectify this shortcoming. Given the absence of systematic prior work, doing so is a rather formidable task. Crawford recognises that the inherently ‘ephemeral’ nature of emotions poses major ‘methodological concerns’.\textsuperscript{9} Mercer worries that ‘emotion is hard to define, hard to operationalize, hard to measure, and hard to isolate from other factors’.\textsuperscript{10} This is why Jervis acknowledges that he ‘would very much like to produce a study that shows

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{6} Richard Ned Lebow, ‘Reason, emotion and cooperation’, \textit{International Politics}, 42(3) 2005: 283–313, at 283. See also his \textit{Between War and Peace: The Nature of International Crisis} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).
  \item \textsuperscript{7} Christopher Hill, \textit{The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy} (Houdmills: Palgrave, 2003), p. 116.
  \item \textsuperscript{9} Crawford, ‘The passion of world politics’, p. 118.
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Mercer, ‘Approaching emotion’, p. 1.
\end{itemize}
how emotions and cognitions interact in politics, but at this point the challenge is simply too great’. We certainly do not pretend to meet all aspects of this challenge successfully in the context of a short essay. But we do hope at least to carve out a path that may offer helpful suggestions about how to begin tackling some of the issues at stake. We do so by proceeding along the following lines.

After highlighting the key reasons for the neglect of emotions, and the compelling need to rectify this shortcoming, we briefly engage the literature on psychology and foreign policy. While appreciating the ensuing scholarly contributions we also draw attention to their limits. Psychological studies of decision-makers can illuminate their behaviour, but fall short of explaining how emotions are enmeshed in larger socio-political dynamics. Added to this are limits imposed by the type of quantitative methods that prevails among these inquiries. While surveys and other systematic empirical assessments may reveal the depth and prevalence of emotions in decision-makers and samples of the public, they can tell us little about why these perceptions have emerged and how they shape notions of identity and community. Recent constructivist scholarship can address some of these challenges, and we discuss how the respective scholars have proposed to do so. But we also note that none of them, including Mercer and Crawford, have actually studied emotions or even advanced concrete suggestions about how this might be done.

We argue that the relative dearth of discussions about how to study emotions can be explained by the fact that much of international relations scholarship, including constructivist contributions, tends to rely primarily on social scientific methods. But emotions are too ephemeral to be understood exhaustively by the type of systematic inquiries that characterise the social sciences. We explain in detail why this is the case, and then highlight the need to supplement social scientific approaches with modes of analysis stemming from the humanities. Although we refrain from discussing particular methodologies—a task that would go far beyond the scope of a short essay—we highlight the need for a certain level of methodological reorientation. We identify three key components that are essential to this process: 1) the need to accept that research can be insightful and valid even if it engages unobservable phenomena, and even if the results of such

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inquiries can neither be measured nor validated empirically; 2) the
importance of examining processes of representation and communication,
such as visual depictions of emotions and the manner in which they shape
political perceptions and dynamics; and 3) a willingness to consider
alternative forms of insight, such as those stemming from aesthetic sources,
which, we argue, are particularly suited to capture emotions. While
elaborating on these three core points we also consider possible objections
to each of them. We conclude by highlighting that scholars can optimise
their ability to understand the politics of emotions only by making full use
of the entire spectrum of human perception and cognition, which requires
more open-ended and active communication between different academic
disciplines and fields of knowledge.

THE NEGLECT OF EMOTIONS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
SCHOLARSHIP

Since few scholars now contest that emotions play a role in world politics
we dwell on this point only briefly, and only through an obvious example:
the inherently emotional nature of global terrorism. Consider how the
motives and means of terrorists are usually presented in emotional terms,
as ‘fanatical’, ‘irrational’ or simply ‘evil’. Reactions to terrorist attacks are
equally emotional. They involve dealing with the memory of death,
suffering and trauma, leading to emotional calls for political action, often
involving feelings of retribution that go far beyond the mere need to
provide security. Political leaders do not shy away from drawing upon
emotional appeals, such as nationalist rhetoric, to win support for their positions.

These emotional dynamics are neither surprising nor new. Numerous
modern philosophers have long drawn attention to the key role that fear
plays in projects of political renewal. Politicians have, indeed, always used
fear to manipulate the population in the manner that served their particular
interests. Hobbes even went a step further. Fear, he believed, not only leaves
strong marks on public debates and policy-making; it can also serve as an
important source for collective political and moral foundations.12 A perfect
illustration of this dynamic can be seen in the new post-11 September world
order, the Pax Americana that Washington has established around a moral
crusade against the forces of evil. Numerous scholars—before and after 11

September—have stressed how the fear engendered by terror can create moral certainty and lead otherwise diverse and disagreeing constituencies to swift, universal agreements on basic principles and actions. As a result, though, the foundations of our morals are articulated mostly in negative ways, based on fear and closure, rather than on a willingness to openly discuss difficult issues to ground political position in a positive affirmation of basic values and principles.\(^\text{13}\)

These and numerous other linkages between emotions and politics are central to international relations. Crawford gets to the heart of the matter when stressing that emotions are everywhere in world politics, from the above mentioned (mis)use of fear to the necessity of goodwill and empathy in peace settlement negotiations. But she convincingly speaks of a ‘taken-for-granted status’, stressing that ‘emotion is implicit and ubiquitous, but undertheorized’.\(^\text{14}\)

Both Crawford and Mercer identify prevailing understandings of reason as a key explanation for the scholarly neglect of emotion. They stress that realism and liberalism rest on the fundamental assumption that the behaviour of states is based on rational, or at least intelligible factors. Crawford strongly laments that this rational actor paradigm has become so dominant that ‘emotions virtually dropped from the radar screen of international relations theorists’.\(^\text{15}\) Mercer too critiques the prevailing scholarly eagerness to ‘purge’ emotions from explanations.\(^\text{16}\) Lebow has recently affirmed the adequacy of these complaints, stressing, as Mercer did, that reason and emotion are not nearly as mutually exclusive as was assumed by prevailing approaches to international relations.\(^\text{17}\) The attempt to separate emotion and rationality is, of course, part of a long modern

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\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., p. 117.


\(^\text{17}\) Lebow, ‘Reason, emotion and cooperation’, pp. 284–5.
tradition. Historically perceived to encapsulate women’s ‘dangerous desires’, emotions were thought to be feelings or bodily sensations that overtook us, distorting thought and the ability to make rational and ethical judgement. Justice must be free of passion, it was believed, because emotion impels people to perform irrational acts of violence and harm. The ensuing assumptions go far beyond the realm of philosophy and political theory. They permeate much of decision-making and public debate as well. Consider how nuclear strategy during the Cold War was based on highly rationalised assumptions, even when these assumptions bordered on the absurd. Or look at a recent media release by the Australian Law Reform Commission, which aims at generating public debate on the effectiveness and need for sedition laws in the fight against global terrorism. Its main objective is to come up with useful (read rational) policy advice by taking ‘some of the emotion out of the debate’.

**INSIGHTS FROM STUDIES ON POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY AND FOREIGN POLICY**

While much of international relations scholarship has eschewed emotions for decades, one key exception stands out: a long tradition of studies in political psychology and foreign policy. George Marcus distinguishes between two aspects of this tradition. One seeks to understand the role that psychology plays in the process of political decision-making. Another examines how leaders and the population at large emotionally react to particular political situations.

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The first approach is epitomised by the work of Jervis, Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, to name only some of the most prominent representatives. Hill notes how these approaches seek to understand the complex relationship between emotion and reason in the process of decision-making. They oppose the assumption that decisions are taken on the basis of ‘classical rationality’, stressing, instead, that leaders have often no choice but to draw upon ideas and insights that may involve ‘the emotional rather than the calculating part of the brain’. Decision-makers, related studies stress, are also shaped by deeply-seated emotional predispositions, particularly those that were acquired in the early, formative stages of their life.

A recent example of the second approach can be found in an essay that appeared in Political Psychology, one of the most prominent outlets for such research. It features a systematic empirical study of ‘causal attributions’ for the terrorist attacks of 11 September. Surveying roughly 1,000 US citizens, the authors assess how participants reacted emotionally to 11 September. They examine how anger and sadness shaped people’s understanding of the event. These two emotions led to different thought contents. Anger, the study found, was linked to blame. It intensified the search for causal explanations of 11 September. Participants who mostly experienced sadness, by contrast, associated their feelings with loss, which render causal judgement less relevant to the respective political perceptions.

These and numerous other studies on political psychology have made important contributions to our understanding of emotions and world

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politics. But the respective approaches can understand the role of emotions only up to a certain point. Three limits stand out.

First, most of the above approaches, particularly those that deal with psychology and deterrence, still operate within the rational choice paradigm. Mercer is particularly concerned about the ensuing consequences. He laments that emotions are seen only as interferences with or deviations from rationality. Scholars tend to study emotions primarily to explain misperceptions, thus missing out on a range of other important insights.28 Hill writes of approaches that conceptualise rationality as an ‘ideal type’. But people hardly ever behave rationally in a consistent manner or even manage to agree on what doing so means in the first place.29 Marcus disagrees equally with the prevailing assumption that emotions ‘should be constrained and minimized so that reason dictates judgment with minimal distraction’.30 Jervis and Lebow explain why reason took on such an exclusive role, even in scholarly endeavours that sought to understand the role of emotions. The answers, they believe, have to do with the nature of social science research, which has for decades attempted to subsume emotion to cognition. Even the field of psychology, they stress, was at the time of their earlier studies ‘purely cognitive’,31 paying little attention to questions of affect.32

Second, empirical inquiries into the emotional attributes of individuals have difficulties assessing the crucial historical dimensions that underlie feelings. No matter how carefully designed a systematic survey is, it can only assess patterns.33 It cannot explain how emotions emerged and evolved. But for some scholars this is precisely the key to understanding

30 Marcus, ‘Emotions in politics’, p. 221.
31 Lebow, ‘Reason, emotion and cooperation’, p. 304.
emotions. Corey Robin, for instance, stresses how political fear always ‘has a history, and to a surprising degree, it is a history of ideas’.34

Third, studies on psychology and foreign policy that do delve into historical dimensions, such as those that examine the formative psychological experiences of decision-makers, tend to do so at the level of the individual. Illuminating as they may well be, such scholarly inquiries are not designed to assess the broader societal dynamics through which emotions come to shape the constitution of community, and thus the context within which politics—domestic and international—takes place.

CONSTRUCTIVIST DEBATES ON EMOTIONS AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO WORLD POLITICS

The recent emergence of constructivist scholarship in international relations has helped to address some of these shortcomings. Numerous authors recognise that emotions have a history and that this history is essential to how collective identities—including those of states—are constituted. Crawford, for instance, stresses that emotions, and the situation in which they become political, are linked to particular historical, political and cultural circumstances.35 The obvious example she cites here relates to the perceived anarchy of the international system, which neorealists see as playing a key role in generating tension and conflict. Crawford and other constructivists oppose this interpretation. Instead, they follow the logic of earlier, classical realists, stressing that conflict emerges not from systematic restraints, but from the manner in which emotions, such as fear or anger, shape the perception of decision-makers.36 Mercer, too, points out that questions of affect play a crucial role in determining how individual and collective identities are constituted, thus also shaping perceptions of the international system and the threats it may pose to states.37 Lebow, likewise, recognises how the behaviour of states is

34 Robin, Fear, p. 28.
36 Ibid., p. 119.
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intrinsically linked to their prior identity and interests, which, in turn, are bound up with a range of emotional factors.38

Acknowledging the relationship between emotion and identity in international relations scholarship opens up the possibility of learning from debates about emotions that have been waged in other disciplines, where constitutive or constructivist approaches have for long recognised that emotions cannot be separated from their social context. Scholars in disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy and feminist theory passionately disagree with each other about how emotions should be understood and appreciated.39 But they agree by and large on the need to oppose two stereotypical views of emotions: that they are purely private and irrational phenomena.

Recent literature on the sociology of emotion suggests in particular that feelings are an active component of identity and community.40 Emotions

38 Lebow, ‘Reason, emotion and cooperation’, p. 284.
help us make sense of ourselves, and situate us in relation to others and the world that surrounds us. They frame forms of personal and social understanding, and are thus inclinations that let individuals locate their identity within a wider collective. As Sara Ahmed suggests, emotions are an intimate part of the attachments that bind individuals to particular objects and to others; they ‘colour’ the relational ties that can come to constitute identity and belonging.41 Feelings of both pleasure and pain are illustrative here. An encounter that brings pleasure can create a certain kind of attachment to whatever brings that joy. Meanwhile, a painful or regrettable encounter may create a similar attachment, perhaps a ‘negative’ one, to the object or other that inflicted the pain. The emotional nature of identity and communal belonging is implicit, because our sense of identity and belonging are constituted by the way we attach and situate ourselves within the social world.

A substantial body of literature also emphasises that emotions accompany so-called rational actions as much as irrational ones. Robert Solomon and Martha Nussbaum stress that emotions are important forms of knowledge and evaluative thought.42 Understood in this way emotions either involve, or indeed are, judgements. Emotions are always about something, or are directed at something for specific reasons. Anger implies that something thought to be bad or wrong has happened, fear can be attributed to the feeling that something untoward may happen, and similarly, joy and happiness imply something good. Emotions can thus be seen as


telling us certain things, as providing insights and pointers that could be of use in our attempts to address social and political challenges. This so-called cognitive approach to emotions, epitomised by the work of Solomon and Nussbaum, has always been juxtaposed to more biologically-based assumptions about emotions. The latter positions, influenced by William James but going back to ancient Greek philosophy, assume that emotions are not primarily thoughts, judgements and beliefs, but bodily sensations. We refrain from entering or even summarising these debates in detail here, in part because doing so would go beyond the focus of this paper, in part because several international relations scholars, such as Crawford, Marcus, Mercer and Andrew Ross, have already done so convincingly. The latter two have, in addition, outlined the relevance of recent insights on affects from the neurosciences and attempted to apply them to the study of political phenomena.43

THE LIMITS OF SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC INQUIRIES INTO EMOTIONS

Although the centrality of emotions to world politics is now largely recognised, there are surprisingly few studies that systematically analyse how emotions matter in concrete political settings. This is puzzling, for one would have expected at least some serious inquiries more than half a decade after Crawford’s convincing call to take emotions seriously appeared in one of the most prominent disciplinary journals. Even more surprising is that there are not even any sustained discussions about how to go about studying emotions in world politics. The few methodological debates that do exist tend to focus on inquiries into the personality of decision-makers and on largely quantitative approaches that assess the emotional predispositions of leaders and samples of the population.44 Crawford writes little about method other than to suggest that scholars examine diaries, transcripts and interviews with political leaders—aimed at finding out how emotions are expressed or denied in the context of


decision-makers.\footnote{Crawford, ‘The passion of world politics’, p. 131.} Mercer hopes that emotions can be recognised by looking for norms in international politics, but he refrains from further specifying how exactly this is to be done.\footnote{Mercer, ‘Approaching emotion’, p. 11.} Most other commentators who convincingly draw attention to the significance of emotions offer no suggestions about how to actually study them.

We argue that the relative dearth of methodological debates on how to study emotions is linked to the strong—at times almost exclusive—role that social science occupies in most approaches to the study of international relations, such as realism, liberalism and constructivism. Although social science offers a wide range of methods, the most prevalent among them are limited in their ability to understand the nature, role and impact of phenomena as ephemeral as emotions. Emotions cannot be quantified, nor can they easily be measured, even in qualitative terms. For a social scientist, investigating emotions would thus seem to result in research that is speculative or tenuous at best. Ross has already emphasised this problem convincingly, while also noting that some of the more interpretative work in international relations has already engaged emotions and affective phenomena.\footnote{Ross, ‘Coming in from the cold’, p. 197.} Convincing examples of such scholarship include Jenny Edkins’ work on trauma, inquiries into identity and foreign policy by scholars such as David Campbell and Michael Shapiro, or more recent attempts to theorise the role of shame and humiliation.\footnote{See, for instance, Jenny Edkins, \textit{Trauma and the Memory of Politics} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); David Campbell, \textit{Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Michael J. Shapiro, \textit{Violent Cartographies: Mapping Cultures of War} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); William A. Callahan, ‘War, shame, and time: pastoral governance and national identity in England and America’, \textit{International Studies Quarterly}, 50(2) 2006: 395–419; Paul Saurette, ‘You dissin me? Humiliation and post 9/11 global politics’, \textit{Review of International Studies}, 32(3) 2006: 495–522; Alex Danchev, “‘Like a dog!’: humiliation and shame in the war on terror’, \textit{Alternatives: Global, Local, Political}, 31(3) 2006: 259–83.} But many of these interpretative inquiries, insightful and important as they are, have not yet entered the more scientifically-oriented debates in so-called mainstream international relations scholarship. This is the case because even its more hermeneutically oriented versions, such as constructivism, nevertheless tend to display what John Ruggie calls a ‘commitment to the idea of social
science’.49 This commitment comes in various shades, but often includes, as Richard Price and Christian Reus-Smit stress in a revealing review article, a basic adherence to an ‘empirically-based form of critical scholarship’ which is designed to arrive at ‘logical and empirically plausible interpretations of actions, events or processes’.50

It is thus not surprising that even those constructivist approaches that deal specifically with emotions are influenced by a search for knowledge that is if not objective, then at least systematic, measurable and ideally also falsifiable. Mercer would like to understand how the interaction between emotional and relational influences on decision-making leads to reactions that are ‘systematic and generalizable’.51 Jervis aspires to study the psychological aspect of various political behaviours through a ‘rigorous analysis’.52 Lebow hopes to arrive at a new paradigm or even a ‘fully blown theory’ that assesses numerous emotional dimensions of international relations.53 Crawford hopes to ‘devise valid measures of emotions’ in an attempt to create a ‘comprehensive theory of emotion in world politics’.54 One of the possibilities she mentions is measuring how certain emotions manifest themselves through particular physiological conditions, such as fear being expressed through higher heart rate, increased blood pressure and perspiration.55

Such a search for measurable manifestations of emotional influences offers limited opportunities to understand the politics of emotions. When studying the nature and impact of emotions the main challenge is not to find

55 Ibid., p. 118.
forms of knowledge that can approximate external appearances as authentically as possible. The inner feelings of a person cannot easily be known or even communicated authentically. The same is the case with emotions that are shared by communities. They cannot be assessed in the same manner as more tangible phenomena, such patterns of conflict, trade volumes or peace agreements.

We also need modes of analysis that capture the more elusive emotional elements of political events, their mood and spirit, the manner in which they matter deeply even though rational or even verbal forms of communication may not be able to express, let alone objectively measure them. We now seek to identify the type of attitude to knowledge, method and evidence that would facilitate such an approach to understanding the politics of emotions. We do so by advancing three particular proposals.

PROPOSAL I: ACCEPT AMBIVALENCE IN THE STUDY OF EMOTIONS AND POLITICS

Our first proposition is brief and of a preliminary nature. We contend that the numerous intangible but nevertheless important political dimensions of emotions can be appreciated only if scholars accept that insight cannot necessarily produce certainty, or at least not the type of knowledge that is objective and measurable. Needed is not a systematic theory of emotions, an attempt to fix the parameters of knowledge once and for all, but a more open-ended search for a type of scholarly and political sensibility that could understand the influence of emotions even where and when it is not immediately apparent. Emotions are inevitably bound up with socio-cultural values, with how feelings and related political attitudes are constituted and reconstituted in particular communities. One can only start to understand the meaning and significance of the ensuing dynamics if one does not judge them from a pre-conceived conceptual standpoint.

One possible opposition against such explorations of emotions is obvious: the fear that ensuing insights into politics are irrational and relativistic at best, meaningless at worst. How, indeed, can perspectives on political reality be judged as legitimate or not if traditional standards of judgement do not apply?

Although ephemeral phenomenon such as feelings or mood cannot be measured through criteria that lie outside their own modes of being, one can still judge insights into or derived from them. Not all emotions are equally political or relevant, nor is every attempt to understand and interpret them.
Determining the value of a particular insight is always a process of negotiating knowledge, of deciding where its rotating axes should be placed and how its outer boundaries should be drawn. The actual act of judging can thus be made in reference to the very process of negotiating knowledge.

Insights into emotions could be evaluated not by some prior standard of reference, but by their ability to generate new and valuable perspectives on political puzzles. For instance, if examinations of fear can provide us with explanations of political behaviour that would not have been possible through other, more factual accounts, then they have made a contribution to knowledge, even though the so-generated insight may remain contested and, ultimately, un-provable. This process is neither radical nor unique to the task of assessing ephemeral phenomena such as emotions. It applies just as much to the domain of reason. Quentin Skinner is one of numerous scholars who stress how our judgement of what is reasonable depends not on some prior set of objective criteria, but on the concepts we employ to describe what we see or experience as rational.56

PROPOSAL II: EXAMINE EMOTIONS THROUGH REPRESENTATION AND COMMUNICATION

Our exploration of alternative insights into emotions has been somewhat abstract so far, but we hope to make the issue clearer and more practically relevant with our second proposition: that one of the most promising locations to study emotions is the manner in which they are represented and communicated.

There are, of course, numerous ways in which emotions are communicated, from political speeches and constitutional declarations to protest marches and televised depictions of famine, terrorism or any other intensely emotional political event. We argue that examining these representations is as close as we can get to understanding emotions. We do so even though we recognise that there are inherent limits to this endeavour. What can one gain from studying mere representations, rather than the real political phenomena they seek to depict? Representations always entail a certain bias: they may tell us more about the values of those representing than the objects or events they portray. Are not real political facts and

First, representations are all we have to understand emotions. Crawford noted convincingly that emotions are ‘deeply internal’, making it very difficult to distinguish “genuine” emotions from their instrumental display. Since emotions are inherently internal we can only know them through practices of representing them, through narratives, symbols or other ways of communicating feelings and beliefs. Consider how surveys, no matter how meticulously designed and executed, can only assess what people say about their emotions. The data that such studies produce still only reflect certain representations about emotions, rather than the emotions themselves. Ignoring this difference does not make scholarship any more objective or convincing. Quite to the contrary, doing so leads to major misperceptions about the significance of emotions and our abilities to understand them properly.

Since the issue of representation is central to understanding the politics of emotion we offer a brief elaboration here. We do so by observing what happens when emotions become most acutely visible: in times of crisis. This is not to say that emotions matter only during traumatic events. Emotions play a central role at all times: they lie at the heart of how communities, including states, are organised and function. But traumatic events challenge and often uproot related attachments, exposing their emotional nature in a particularly acute and visible manner.

Elaine Scarry’s innovative and influential work on pain and trauma convincingly illustrates the issues at stake. She strongly believes that pain, and the emotions associated with it, is an inherently unknowable phenomena. One person can never really know what another person’s pain feels like. It cannot be verified on objective grounds. Indeed, Scarry asserts

59 Or so suggests Crawford, ‘The passion of world politics’, p. 130; Ross, ‘Coming in from the cold’, p. 211.
that ‘pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it’. Many agree with her arguments. A growing body of literature that deals with the respective phenomena points out that feelings of disbelief are particularly common among survivors of major traumas, who tend to find that there are no words to convey adequately what happened. Words suddenly seem incapable of representing the physical and emotional sensations experienced. This is one of the reasons why the immediate response to 11 September was one of shock and silence. David Eng and Edkins are among several commentators who stress how the entire city became ‘utterly silent’, how bystanders became speechless, ‘transfixed in horror as they watched the impossible turning into the real in front of their eyes’.

An odd contradiction arises out of the ensuing political dynamics. The very fact that emotions are inherently private often leads to a compulsion to communicate them to others. Or, as seen from the other side of the social relationship: if I can never truly know another person’s emotion, I would at least like to know the visible causes or manifestations of this emotion. Consider how the media almost obsessively depicts pain-causing phenomena as a substitute for actually knowing pain. This includes a range of highly symbolic representations that give us the illusion of coming as close as possible to the actual pain, such as ‘images of starvation, of emaciated concentration camp victims, of hooded prisoners, of broken and bleeding skins, of blood-stained floors in prison cells’. The compulsion to


depict bodies in pain, as a replacement for knowing the true emotions involved, is an old and deeply entrenched cultural practice, reaching from early Christian art all the way to the recent photographs of torture at the Abu Ghraib prisons in Iraq.⁶⁴

The second major point we want to make here follows from the recognition that studying representations comes as close to actually understanding emotions: it is the simple acknowledgment that representations matter and that they do so in a highly politicised manner. Representation is the process by which individual emotions acquire a collective dimension and, in turn, shape social and political processes. Here too, the issue of trauma is illustrative. Although distant witnesses can never truly understand the emotions of somebody affected by a tragedy, the process of communication establishes a public context where the private nature of grief can be ascribed wider social meaning and significance. Luc Boltanski speaks of ‘an unstable position between real emotion and fictional emotion’.⁶⁵ There will always be voices that seek to tell stories about emotions, weaving their accounts—incomplete as they may well be—into the fabric of both individual and collective conceptions of being and knowing.⁶⁶ In other words, individual experiences of trauma can translate, through processes of representation, into shared or collective experiences. David Morris refers to a ‘culture of pain’ while Edkins speaks of a ‘rush to memory’, showing how mechanisms of commemoration and remembrance intersect private grief with public mourning, and in doing so transcribe individual injury and the emotions associated with it into a larger, more collective, political discourse.⁶⁷

The influence that representations of emotion exert on political dynamics is particularly evident in the realm of visual culture. A growing body of


⁶⁷ Edkins, Trauma and the Memory of Politics, pp. 73–91; David B. Morris, The Culture of Pain (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). See also Duncan S. A. Bell (ed.), Memory, Trauma and World Politics: Reflections on the Relationship between Past and Present (New York: Palgrave, 2006).
literature examines how in the age of globalisation various senses interact with the visual and how the latter has come to be seen as a particularly ‘reliable’, even ‘authentic’ way of knowing the world. Some go as far as stressing that the real political battles today are being fought precisely within these visual and seemingly imaginary fields of media representations, where ‘affectively charged images’ shape our understanding of political phenomena more so than the actual phenomena themselves.

Locating visual representations and communications is thus an important step towards appreciating the political roles emotions can play. We began this essay by highlighting how emotional representations of pain, such as images of 11 September or of tortured bodies in Abu Ghraib, have influenced the nature and direction of public debates about the issues at stake. The fact that images of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York were broadcast worldwide substantially shaped the political impact of the event. Had news of the attack been communicated by texts alone, as would have been the case only a few decades ago, the response would unlikely have been equally intense. Likewise, the unprecedented level of aid that was committed in response to the Boxing Day tsunami that devastated parts of East and South Asia in 2004 would not have been possible without the global circulation of graphic and emotional depictions of the disaster. Only a few months later an equally devastating natural disaster, this time an earthquake, affected northern Pakistan. But with few images reaching the outside world, and few westerners being directly affected, the disaster created not nearly as much attention and generated not nearly as much global solidarity as the more emotional representation of the tsunami did.


PROPOSAL III: BROADEN THE PERCEPTIVE AND COGNITIVE TOOLS TO UNDERSTAND THE POLITICS OF EMOTION

To understand and evaluate linkages between emotions and world politics we need to broaden our descriptive and analytical tools. Rather than relying on social science methods alone we should complement them with modes of inquiry stemming from the humanities. Many intellectual traditions in the humanities can offer important sources and methods for the study of emotions. Examples here include approaches such as phenomenology, hermeneutics and semiotics or methods applied in ethnography, architecture, art history, musicology and media studies. There are, for instance, extensive methodological tools designed to study visual images. It cannot be the task of a short essay to elaborate on the wide range of these alternative, humanities-oriented methodological approaches. Instead we would like to illustrate their potential by highlighting the importance of aesthetic sources, such as literature, photography, cinema, visual art and music.

We argue that aesthetic sources play a particularly important role in illuminating the emotional aspects of politics. In doing so we follow several scholars, such as Martha Nussbaum, who believe that aesthetic sources are not only inspired by the need to express feelings, but also able to solicit a range of emotional responses from those who encounter them. Aesthetic ways of expressing emotions offer an alternative to the more habit-prone verbal forms of communication. We may, in fact, have become so used to the latter that they have become intellectualised to the point that they can no longer capture the emotions that underlie our thoughts and behaviour. This is why Nussbaum stresses that aesthetic ways of representing emotions should be accepted, alongside more conventional sources, as legitimate elements in the formulation of ethical and political judgement.

Aesthetic sources are particularly suited to capture emotions because they seek to do more than simply represent an object or event as realistically

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as possible. To be of artistic value, a work of art—be it a poem, an opera, a painting or a photograph—must be able to engage and capture not only exterior realities, but also, and above all, our human and emotional relationship with them. The key is to offer an interpretation of reality that actively differs from the reality itself. Hans-Georg Gadamer calls this process ‘aesthetic differentiation’.73 A brief and well-known example may help to illustrate why such aesthetic differentiation can be important to our understanding of emotions and politics. Consider how Pablo Picasso's famous painting Guernica has given us insight into the Spanish Civil War and the human psyche not just because it sought recognition and life-like representation. The significance of Guernica as a form of insight and historical memory is located precisely in the fact that Picasso created a distance from life-like representations, thus capturing a certain emotional truth about the atrocity of the civil war that no factual account could ever hope to achieve.74

It is thus no coincidence that one of the most remarkable but often overlooked reactions to the terrorist attacks of 11 September is the astonishing outpouring of artistic creativity. Countless artists around the world have tried to deal with both the nature of the tragic event and its implications for the future. They painted and filmed, they wrote poems and novels, they composed and performed music. This wave of aesthetic creativity can be seen as a way of dealing with the emotional aspects of the trauma: a recognition that prevalent faculties, such as reason, are unable to comprehend this terrifying event in its totality.

Several aesthetic inquiries into international politics already exist. Some of them also address the issue of emotions.75 Many of these studies are insightful, but they are also often perceived as contentious. Some social

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scientists, such as the terrorist expert Walter Laqueur, find much merit in the use of literature and other aesthetic forms of interpreting political phenomena. They assume that there are inherent benefits in deriving information from what is one of literature’s main assets: to provide detailed descriptions of situations, including emotional states, that would otherwise remain beyond our personal experiences. But numerous other scholars are much more sceptical. Alexander Wendt, one of the most influential voices in contemporary international relations scholarship, believes that ‘poetry, literature and other humanistic disciplines … are not designed to explain global war or Third World poverty, and as such if we want to solve those problems our best hope, slim as it maybe, is social science’. We are fully aware that we do gross injustice to Wendt by citing this statement out of context. His work is complex and includes reflections on social science that call for a methodological pluralism. We have highlighted the above passage only because it captures an attitude that remains prevalent in the more disciplinary-bound versions of social science research, which considers humanities-oriented methods as peripheral and perhaps even inappropriate to the type of real-world issues that preoccupy scholars of international relations.

CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR CROSS-DISCIPLINARY COMMUNICATION

To understand the complex and seemingly elusive relationship between emotions and world politics we need to use all of our perceptive and cognitive tools. Rather than relying on social scientific methods alone, as scholars of international relations have tended to do, we need the type of ‘common discourse’ that Edward Said and other more interdisciplinary authors advocate: a broad understanding of society and politics that replaces the current specialisation of knowledge, where only a few fellow experts are still capable of communicating with each other. We may well even need to heed to Hayden White’s encouragement and look beyond the

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77 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. xvi.
currently fashionable dichotomy of fact and fiction. New ways of recognising the politics of emotion could emerge if we returned to earlier intellectual traditions that provided space for a range of different truth claims, including those ‘that could be presented to the reader only by means of fictional techniques of representation’?81

The prime task of this essay was to take a step in the direction of such inquiries into the relationship between emotions and politics. We fully recognise that by doing so we have taken on a topic that is far too large to cover comprehensively in the context of a short essay. Our objective was thus limited to identifying the type of attitude to knowledge and evidence that can facilitate inquiries into emotions. We have, however, refrained from discussing particular methods or ways of operationalising research. The latter would entail focusing on a very particular political problem and then identifying the emotions attached to them, whether they are, for instance, fear, anger, shame, pity, compassion, empathy or sympathy. To be politically meaningful a study would then need to demonstrate, empirically or conceptually, what exact role emotions play in the issues at stake. Doing so would also entail investigating the extent to which prevailing modes of inquiry into international relations, such as those shaped by social science, may already be able to account for the issues and factors that are to be explained. The features remain elusive, such as those linked to the more intangible aspects of the politics of emotions, and call for a willingness to explore alternatives modes of inquiry. Particularly important here are methods developed in the humanities, such as those designed to understand the nature and impact of visual and other aesthetic sources. A more active exploration of these sources can increase our understanding of the relationship between emotions and world politics, even though the knowledge may at times appear uncertain or even dubious when evaluated by standards of measurement applied in the social sciences.

To argue for a more sustained reliance on humanities-oriented modes of inquiry is not to reduce the value of social science or to question the impact of material forces. Nor is it a particularly radical proposition. There have always been scholars who sought to break out of disciplinary politics and embrace a more holistic approach to knowledge. Lebow is one of several

senior international relations scholars who have recently called upon his colleagues to take the humanities more seriously.\textsuperscript{82} Such calls tend to echo for a while, then drown in the noise of disciplinary quarrels. Leaving such quarrels behind is essential if we are to attain a more appropriate understanding of the relationship between emotions and world politics.

We need a more open-minded and sustained form of communication between different fields of knowledge. Scientific and social scientific methods, for instance, can be highly useful to assess how individuals experience and process emotions. Related inquiries range from neuroscientific studies into brain stimuli to quantitative surveys of how individuals respond emotionally to particular political events. Such modes of analysis are, however, less appropriate when it comes to understanding the manner in which emotions are represented and communicated. Here methods from the humanities, such as those designed to interpret texts or visual sources, can provide us with important insight into the processes through which individual emotions become collectivised. Once we are equipped with a more thorough and nuanced understanding of these relatively elusive but important political features we can return to social scientific methods, which may then provide us with a more precise understanding of the actual impact that these representations and communications of emotions have on political practices.

Taken together, such cross-disciplinary forms of communication not only reveal emotions as inherent within all political perceptions and decisions, but also provide us with a better understanding of how these perceptions and decisions shape political phenomena. Unravelling how individual emotions are interwoven with social structures of knowledge and belief may, for instance, increase our ability to understand the motives and behaviour of states and other actors that play a key role in international politics. The ensuing insights would be of significance to a range of inquiries, from studies concerning terrorism, international security and cooperation to concerns with more normative issues, such as international justice, multiculturalism and reconciliation.
