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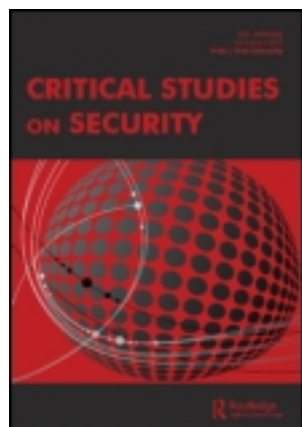
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Critical Studies on Security

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

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Published online: 14 Jun 2013.

To cite this article: Emma Hutchison (2013): Affective communities as security communities, Critical Studies on Security, 1:1, 127-129

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2013.790227>

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Affective communities as security communities

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(Received 21 November 2012; final version received 4 December 2012)

In this intervention, I argue that conceptualizing the politically constitutive nature of emotions is crucial for a more holistic and reflective understanding of security. Emotions are a mechanism through which political identities and communities are shaped and sustained. They are part of the social fabric that binds communities together. In certain circumstances and particularly after political conflict and crises, emotions can be mobilized in ways that focus communities on trauma and generate antagonistic perceptions and mindsets. Security becomes defined narrowly; resources are spent keeping perceived dangers at bay. Highlighting the links between emotions, community and security, I underline the need to examine how the emotional meanings that underpin these kinds of ‘affective communities’ can constitute threat perceptions and create violent security patterns. Doing so is critical as it provides a pathway through which scholars and policy analysts can rethink security through the type of social emotional dispositions that traditional security approaches are both predicted on and in turn perpetuate.

Keywords: community; emotions; international relations; security; threat

For many, it would seem commonsensical to say that security is emotional. Security is, after all, about what makes one *feel* secure. Security is about protecting people from undue pain; it is concerned with guarding against incremental forms of suffering and against often violent, traumatic events. In disciplinary International Relations, however, emotions have for long been far from mind when reflecting upon security and its institutions. Security has traditionally been the realm of *realpolitik* and of ‘dispassionate debates’ on calculated destruction and strategic advantage. As Carol Cohn (1987, 688–690) famously showed, security is shaped through a language that is cold, ‘clean’, and hard. It is based on the idea of a perfect rationality that somehow exists free of the passions.

Yet, this collection is part of a recent trend in thinking about security that goes against this grain. In this intervention, I look at affective communities in world politics and at how the emotional dimensions of representing violent, traumatic events – the very events that security approaches are intended to guard people against – help to constitute political identity and community. In this light, it may, at first glance, seem a stretch for me to be theorizing emotions and security. My focus may seem ‘soft’ in a realm that deals with the realities of ‘guns and bombs’. Yet, as I see it, it is this soft visceral side of politics and community that is precisely where conceptions of security emerge.

If we momentarily suspend the seemingly entrenched ‘rational’ logic of international security and look to its emotional foundations we can conceptualize the politically constitutive nature of emotions, which is crucial for a more holistic and reflective

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understanding of security. Emotions lie at the core of how communities are organized and function politically and, as such, provide considerable insight into how and why individuals and communities conceive of the world – and of security issues – in the ways that they do. Central here, I suggest, is that emotions help to constitute not only widely held threat perceptions but also in turn security discourses and corresponding policy practices (see also Stein 2013).

To examine the links between community, emotions and security, we need to first dissect the misnomers that have until recently thwarted political research on emotions and security. Two elements are key. The first involves recognizing that emotions are not the antithesis of reason or rationality, as much modern Western thought has held (Elster 1999). Emotions are not irrational pushes and pulls. Rather, emotions are part of the perceptive tools that individuals use to make sense of the world and to situate themselves (Ahmed 2003; Nussbaum 2001). Emotions are in this way an endemic part of rationality. Or, said differently, the rationality from which political (and security-based) decision-making is perceived to occur is fundamentally and inevitably imbued with emotions. The second element then involves understanding that emotions are not individual achievements but are instead deeply social and cultural phenomena. Emotions are formed and structured within particular social and cultural environments (Harré 1986; Lutz 1988). In this way, emotions are both private and public as well as individual and collective. Expressed in a more general way, emotions have a history and a future. Indeed, particular emotional dispositions can be passed down, helping to form and reform social and communal connections.

Insight into the pervasive, social nature of emotions is significant to conceptualizing security because it draws attention to the affective basis of identity and community in world politics, from the local to the global. Emotions are a mechanism through which political communities are shaped and sustained. This is, in part, because the social and cultural nature of emotions means that emotions can only make sense and find meaning within the communal environment in which they have been constituted. Emotional meanings can, in this way, resonate and help to bind community. In particular circumstances or as a consequence of particular issues or events, such historically cultivated and widely held social forms of emotion can additionally be tapped into and actively mobilized. As such, emotions can influence the constitution of collective and political beliefs as well as ensuing political priorities, including, of course, those concerning security (Mercer 2010).

It is no coincidence that the security implications of these social and collective emotional dynamics are most apparent in discussions about trauma, an encounter that at least state-based security provisions are intended to protect people against. Whether it is through crises of war, terrorism or even humanitarian catastrophe, traumatic events are intensely emotional. They leave emotional legacies of suffering that stretch far beyond the individuals directly affected and circulate through a wider community that bears witness. Especially when triggered by political violence, emotions associated with trauma (such as grief, loss, fear, anger and resentment) can constitute political communities that are centred around the source of pain. Communities become closed off, their boundaries in turn reconstituting the very disingenuous inside/outside dichotomies that help to fuel conflict in the first place. Scholars have shown that in such circumstances, political traumas often generate wider social and political responses that define security narrowly and generate antagonistic political affiliations and allegiances (Edkins 2002). Energies and resources are spent keeping perceived ‘dangers’ at bay. Defensive, militaristic security policies may be privileged. Such was the case, for instance, after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington (Ó’Tuathail 2003). A similar scenario then took place in Australia after the 2002 Bali bombing (Hutchison 2010). In both cases,

widespread emotional solidarity helped to reinstate not only a conservative vision of political community but also concomitant security priorities (see also Crawford and Solomon in this collection).

Whether they emerge from a recent trauma or indeed an historical one, here we see the political power of emotions and of mobilizing particular emotional meanings. Indeed, emotional meanings that underpin these kinds of ‘affective communities’ help to constitute the perceptions and mindset from which ideas about threat and the need to secure a community from such a threat can be based. Thus, an awareness of the emotional underpinnings of identity and community adds significantly to understanding discourses and practices of security. Crucially, it helps to appreciate how emotions and associated security patterns can, in fact, feed into a culture or even a cycle of violence by cultivating adversarial and often violent perceptions of others. In doing so, I also believe it takes scholars and policy analysts back to square one, providing a pathway through which we can evaluate and rethink security through the types of social emotional dispositions that traditional approaches are both predicated on and in turn perpetuate.

Notes on contributor

Emma Hutchison is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland. She has published widely on emotions and politics, in journals such as *European Journal of Social Theory*, *International Relations* and *Review of International Studies*.

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