Emotions underpin how political communities are formed and function. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in times of trauma. The emotions associated with suffering caused by war, terrorism, natural disasters, famine and poverty can play a pivotal role in shaping communities and orientating their politics. But until recently the political roles of emotions have received only scant attention.

This book contributes to burgeoning literatures on emotions and international relations by investigating how “affective communities” emerge after trauma. Drawing on several case studies and an unusually broad set of interdisciplinary sources, the book examines the role played by representations – from media images to historical narratives and political speeches. Representations of traumatic events are crucial, the book argues, because they generate socially embedded emotional meanings, which, in turn, enable direct victims and distant witnesses to share the injury – as well as the associated loss – in a manner that affirms a particular notion of collective identity. While ensuing political orders often re-establish old patterns, traumatic events can also generate new “emotional cultures” that genuinely transform national and transnational communities.

Emma Hutchison is a Research Fellow in the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland, Australia. Her work focuses on emotions and trauma in world politics, particularly in relation to security, humanitarianism and international aid. She has published widely on these and related topics in scholarly books and international journals, including International Theory, International Political Sociology, Review of International Studies, and the European Journal of Social Theory.
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Affective Communities in World Politics

Collective Emotions after Trauma

EMMA HUTCHISON
Affective communities in world politics: collective emotions after trauma
Emma Hutchison

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For my family
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This book contributes to burgeoning literature on emotions and international relations by investigating how “affective communities” emerge after traumatic events. While trauma is frequently conceptualized as an individual, isolating experience, this book examines how representations – from media images to historical narratives and political speeches – make traumatic events collectively meaningful. Representations are crucial, the book argues, because they mobilize socially embedded emotional meanings, which, in turn, enable direct victims and witnesses to share the injury and loss in a manner that affirms a particular collective sense of identity. Representations of trauma can thus help to constitute bonds between individuals. They illuminate how and to whom individuals feel emotionally attached. While emotions mobilized after trauma often re-establish prevailing political orders and patterns, traumatic events can also generate new “emotional cultures” that genuinely transform national and transnational communities. The communities that ensue can be conceived of as “affective communities” in so far as they are necessarily constituted through, and distinguished by, social, collective forms of feeling.

One fundamental premise therefore focuses my inquiry: emotions permeate the complex, overlapping social structures that undergird decision making and collective action in world politics. Emotions are a fundamental, unavoidable and inherent dimension of human life, and thus of all social and political life. However, world politics has been traditionally perceived as a realm where, above all, precision, instrumentality and hence a technical, calculated, emotional-less rationality must necessarily prevail. Numerous scholars meanwhile show that the vision of an emotion-free rationality is a chimera. Rationality necessarily contains emotions, just as thinking does feeling. Emotions cannot be removed from political decision making, because emotions exist at the core of human life. Even if we try to hold our emotions at bay, they have always already shaded our inner-most thoughts and perceptions.
of the world around us. But these seemingly individual emotions are always already collective and political. Emotions are embedded in and structured by particular social systems and, as such, are interwoven with the dominant interests, values and aspirations of those systems.

An investigation into the emotional underpinnings of political communities is important to international relations 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. While this book examines the dynamics at stake in times of trauma, the ensuing implications 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 behaviors is thus significant because it assists scholars and analysts to puzzle together how particular political situations come to be. Emotions tell us things. While they 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.

My argument regarding the links between emotions and political communities goes against some strands of international relations scholarship, particularly those who are concerned that such a move may “anthropomorphize” the state. It is true that attributing state actions with emotions and emotionality can be fraught. But, to me, it is a commonsensical proposition. Once we appreciate the “situatedness” of emotions, it becomes apparent that communities of all sizes 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 merely to invoke the argument that it is exactly within such collective social structures that our emotions take on shape and meaning. 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. Emotions can become receptacles of political agency and power. Emotions can help to affect political change, or they can be summoned in service of the status quo, for what may be for the better or for the worse. An appreciation of how such collective emotions operate – how emotions can become entrenched or act as sites of resistance – 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.
Writing this book has been as much a part of a personal search to understand trauma as it has been a scholarly one. Formally, it began some time ago, as my PhD dissertation, but my ruminating about trauma, emotions and community started long before this, as a consequence of my own experiences. In one sense, even to me, what I have endured seems very different from the political trauma I examine in this book. I am reluctant even to label my own experiences “trauma.” Yet, in another sense, there are synergies that suggest that the boundaries between my life and my research are not so black and white. This book would not be what it is without the intersection between the two.

Relatively young – aged eighteen – I was diagnosed with a chronic health condition that, quite literally, made me see the world anew. It was end-stage renal failure, and I was given twelve months until I would need to start dialysis. It was to be only three. The seamless, carefree vision of reality as I knew it was over. Like the instances of political trauma I write of, normal life was replaced with one filled with uncertainty, contingency and doubt. Over the next few years, until I received and fully adjusted to my first kidney transplant, I went through something in the way of suffering that has come to embody a trauma. It is sometimes still hard to believe that it has all happened to me. But kidney failure is by no means the worst that can happen to anyone – in fact, I strangely believe I’m the better for it. Great things have come. Facing something that seems so incomprehensible, I’ve come out the other side better. Myself, my family and my closest connections are stronger because of it. I say this even despite the fact that I am now back on dialysis, my transplant having failed last year.

The impetus for this book thus emerged from a search to understand how we can find meaning in shocking, incomprehensible, traumatic things, and how that meaning can help us to turn things around, to flourish rather than languish. How do we make meaning from
trauma? How does pain shape us? Can the sight of another’s trauma inspire those who witness to care? How are we engendered to perceive some suffering as so traumatic that it warrants a response, while others are left to suffer in silence? The links between emotions and community are central to such questions. But too often in world politics we see these questions left out. With this book I have thus sought to bring them back in. Investigating the intersections between emotions and community is more than just about understanding how trauma can constitute political communities. It is about how we live and interact. It is about how and for whom we really care, and why is it that we do in the ways that we do.

Just as my experiences have pushed me to understand the meaning of trauma, they have also challenged me to understand the meaning of community. This has been a task that has seemed, at least personally, neither straightforward nor easy. Writers such as David Morris and Elaine Scarry intuit much when they stress that chronic pain seems to break down understanding, building up “walls of separation.” This book has thus also emerged from my own grappling – from my fears and my hopes – that when in pain, despite our darkest moments, we are never wholly alone.

While this book began as a PhD dissertation, it has in the five years since been almost completely transformed. Many colleagues and scholars have helped me to get it to where it is now. Reviewers from Cambridge University Press provided invaluable insights and queries that pushed me to take the manuscript further than I would have done otherwise. Tim Dunne and Chris Reus-Smit helped to keep my changes for CUP focused. David Campbell, Jenny Edkins and Barbara Sullivan also read an earlier iteration of the book. Their in-depth, encouraging feedback prompted me to rethink aspects of my approach. Many scholars reviewed parts of the book, either as draft chapters or in article form. For their probing comments and questions, I would particularly like to acknowledge Janice Bially Mattern, Katharine Gelber, Susanna Hast, Karin Fierke, Lauren Leigh Hinthorne, Andrew Linklater, Iver Neumann, Kate Manzo, Jonathan Mercer and anonymous reviewers of articles from which select parts of following chapters are based.

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