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Affection and Identification in U.S. Foreign Policy

Abstract

While the study social construction and discourse has been a part of the critical IR literature for some time, emotions and affects have only recently begun to receive attention from IR scholars. Despite this recent interest, however, the emotions/affects literature still leaves many questions unanswered about their mechanisms of influence on politics. From the perspective of the established critical theory and discourse literature in the field, the theoretical relationship between affects and language remains woefully unexplored. Drawing upon the theories of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, in combination with insights from Ernesto Laclau's work on the theory of discursive hegemony, I develop a fresh approach that theorizes the relationship between affects and language, and how they intermix to produce political identities and discursive power. Lacan's theories offer a methodology for analyzing how different discourse structures channel affects and identity in relation to language. Lacan argues that peoples' identification processes are driven by what he terms *jouissance*, a generalized form of affect. In identifying with political narratives and ideologies, people attain some level of emotional satisfaction, without ever fully attaining a sense of complete affective stability, thus further driving identification processes. Lacanian theory thus offers a systematic framework for studying the relationship between four major contemporary theoretical concerns of IR: emotions/affects, language, identity, and social construction. My dissertation adds to the study of emotions and affects beyond current arguments currently advanced by IR scholars, such as Andrew A.G. Ross and Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison; it adds to our understanding of the discursive construction of identities beyond what poststructuralist scholars, such as David Campbell, argue; and, more broadly, it offers a much deeper understanding of the social construction process beyond what prominent constructivist scholars such as Alexander Wendt argue.

The dissertation consists of two parts. Part I begins with a review of several literatures in IR theory that argue for the centrality of identity, discourse, and emotions to world politics. I demonstrate the shortcomings in these literatures in explaining the power of discourse, identity, and emotions/affects as mutually interweaving phenomena, opening the door to demonstrating the theoretical value-added of my approach. Part II offers three case studies illustrating how my framework can shed light on hitherto ignored aspects of debates surrounding American foreign policy. The first empirical chapter offers an exploration of affects and U.S. foreign policy discourses from September 11, 2001 to the 2003 Iraq war. I offer a theoretical understanding of how the war on terror narrative gained social traction after September 11, and demonstrate that scholars must account for this emotional/affective "hold" if we are going to fully understand one of the most controversial periods in the history of American foreign policy. The second empirical chapter applies this framework to understanding German resistance to American plans for war against Iraq in 2002 and early 2003. Most scholarly examinations of this dispute center on German concerns for, and the perceived American disregard for, international law, and the strategic implications for the trans-Atlantic alliance and world order. My analysis uncovers a hitherto ignored aspect of the dispute: that it was a battle between the desire-driven identities of these states rather than strategic interests alone. The third empirical chapter details the recent history of neoconservatism, and argues that Lacanian theory can help us understand the recent rise and fall of this particular ideological outlook on the role of American power in world politics. A concluding chapter will discuss the implications of taking language and affects seriously in the study of world politics, and argues that only by exploring these crucial aspects of human reality can the discipline of IR more fully grasp the complex dynamics that lead to the implementation of foreign policies.