Beyond Reason and Intention in International Agency

In *Mixed Emotions: Beyond Fear and Hatred in International Conflict*, Andrew A. G. Ross radically calls into question both rationalist and constructivist understandings of agency in International Relations (IR). Ross’s reconceptualization of agency as affective, rather than as purely intentional, points us toward the importance of multimodal processes in the creation, maintenance, and diffusion of international norms around terrorism, human rights, and transitional justice. In his quest to develop an alternative framework for the study of the affective intensity of global politics, Ross engages with core themes from the three subfields of IR: the production of enemies (international security studies), the normative underpinnings of transitional justice and war crimes (global governance), and the movement from economic disaffection to collective violence (international political economy). As such, Ross’s new book is a must read for students and established academics in any field of international politics—whether from an economic, historical, scientific, theoretical, or practical point of view.

The concept of agency in IR garnered much scholarly attention through its dichotomous relationship with structure during the structure-agency debate of the late 1980s to early 2000s. Therein, Alexander E. Wendt famously described agency as one of “two truths” about human existence (the other being the endurance of social structures) wherein humans act to build such structures independently and of their own volition.[1] This is the fundamental understanding of agency as the intentional, willed, independent action of an individual that has long lay at the heart of mainstream IR. Like many of the discipline’s fundamental concepts, this understanding of agency reveals indebtedness to Enlightenment understandings of emotion as diametrically opposed to rationality and reason. In his book, Ross rejects this narrow rational, reasonable, and intentional understanding of agency. He aims to reconceptualize this fundamental concept to reveal how emotions lie “at the heart of political practice in the modern world” (p. vii), pointing to how the sociality of emotions makes them constitutive of politics. Thus, in his book Ross sets out by arguing that mainstream IR theory, including social constructivism,
represents “a broad spectrum of rationalist and state-centric approaches” that are “overly detached and artificially cleansed of complex motivations and commitments that make human actors behave the way they do” (p. viii)—a situation his book aims to address and correct.

Attempting to revolutionize an academic discipline’s understanding of a concept as fundamental as agency to IR has the potential to be a momentous and unwieldy task. However, Ross effectively does so in just 162 pages by splitting his work into two sections: theoretical and empirical. This allows for a profound and well-nuanced theoretical engagement with disciplinary and extra disciplinary (neuroscience and sociology) literature in chapters 1 and 2, and an effective application of those insights through the case studies in chapters 3, 4, and 5—9/11, ethnic conflict, and transitional justice respectively. This work is as much about methodological as it is about theoretical innovation. Drawing on “thick description enhanced by evidence- and theory-driven reconceptualizations,” the case studies “work back and forth from emotional discourse to social practices with nondiscursive dimensions,” essentially drawing on and modifying various techniques of interpretivist methodologies (pp. 60, 63).

In the first case, 9/11, he investigates “the powerful emotions associated with terrorist violence,” demonstrating that the production of a racialized (Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern) terrorist enemy was part and parcel of U.S. government-sponsored activities, and furthermore that this production had affective attributes that had an impact on “public tolerance for the use of force” (p. 11). In the case of ethnic conflict in Serbia/Kosovo and Rwanda, Ross critiques the “cycles of hatred” thesis offered by other scholars, arguing that because “so much of the existing scholarship on ethnic conflict proceeds with a simplistic image of emotion,” we tend to focus too much on identity and not enough on the “complex emotional processes involved in violent conflict” (p. 12). His final case, transitional justice in Rwanda (and to a lesser extent South Africa), demonstrates how “existing approaches to transitional justice... can benefit from increased concern for the emotional contexts in which they operate” (p. 12). Throughout these case studies, Ross consistently applies the core theoretical insights about affect and agency revealed in the first two chapters.

On the first count, he offers one of the most succinct definitions of “affect” to be found in IR—treating “emotion/affect as a multidimensional capability that consists of activations of the insular cortex and limbic system, employs maps of the body and sometimes generates feelings” (p. 20). On the second, he insists that “agency involves not transcending social circulations of affect but internalizing them,” positing that what marks us out as individual actors are not just our goals and preferences (as social constructivists argue) “but also the specific constellations of affect” coursing through each of our bodies (p. 32).

These fundamental understandings of affect and agency feed into the two key concepts Ross uses to connect the (at times) highly abstract theoretical arguments with the interpretivist case studies: “circulations of affect,” and “emotional contagion.” He first presents the core concept of circulations of affect—defined as “conscious and unconscious exchanges of emotion within a social environment” (p. 1) in the introduction, and carries it forward throughout his work. Similarly, the concept of emotional contagion—defined as “the unconscious and unintentional transmission of emotion through a process of display and imitation” (p. 10) is fundamental to Ross’s arguments. Specifically, his discussions about the role emotions play “in sustaining the processes of socialization familiar to constructivist IR theory” supplying “the conscious and unconscious tissue from which social beliefs, norms, and identities are forged” are crucial to his argument (p. 16). Once he establishes the basis of this understanding of affect as being rooted in neuroscience and sociology, Ross presents his primary, “agenda-setting” (p. 6), goal as the quest to demonstrate how “a circulation of affect does more than sustain identities, institutions, and norms; it also shifts the basis of legitimacy beyond these things by coupling them with new sources of symbolic inspiration and performative energy” (p. 16), through his detailed interpretivist analysis of the case studies.

It is through these case studies that Ross’s contribution to the discipline really comes through. Throughout his explorations of diverse political events, he continually demonstrates how the complexity of emotional and affective transmission results in “distinctive forms of social action, for which standard models of agency are not well equipped.” Thus, he applies his affective reconceptualization of agency, questioning the disciplinary assumption that “garden-variety, intentional individuals lie at the heart of agency in global affairs;” pointing instead toward “sub- and trans-personal affective capabilities” and multimodal processes as diverse as political speeches, news broadcasts, reburial ceremonies, and gacaca courts (pp. 51, 52). Ross makes it very clear where he sees his contribution making an impact, insisting that by “emphasizing the creativity of affect, IR theory can more effectively
assess the potential and intensity of emerging actors in international politics” (p. 57). In a diverse and globalized world of overlapping governance, security, and economic assemblages, this reconceptualization of agency is as pertinent as it is timely.

In so doing, Ross engages well with both the disciplinary and extra-disciplinary literature on agency and emotion. From IR theory he points toward mainstream—specifically social constructivist—understandings of agency, identity, and norms; from outside IR he relies on neuroscience, microsociology, and affect theory in his quest to develop an alternative framework for the study of the affective intensity of global politics. That being said, he has engaged less significantly with critical IR theory—particularly postcolonial scholars and the cultural studies literature upon which their arguments rest. Specifically, there seems to be a place for such an engagement in chapter 4 when critiquing the “cycles of hatred” thesis of ethnic conflict, wherein particular societies or racial groups are deemed locked into an emotional cycle of hatred that ensures the perpetual recurrence of violence. Ross convincingly and cogently demonstrates how conceptualizing people (any people, but specifically “raced” others) as impotent in the face of emotion, as “backward” and “irrational,” subordinates their political agency. As Ross so eloquently puts it, “treating a society as locked in an emotional cycle denies its members agency by presuming their affective capabilities are unchanging” (p. 129). This equates to denying agency to the racial other through a process of emotional infantilization.

Here Ross, or future researchers following his lead, may well benefit from an engagement with postcolonial work from within (Tarak Bakarwi, Mark Laffey, and L. M. H. Ling) and outside (Franz Fanon, Edward Said, and Stuart Hall) the discipline of IR, as well as engaging more deeply with feminist voices connected specifically with critical race theory (Sara Ahmed, Sherene Razack, and bell hooks). Such an engagement could have lent some extra credentials to Ross’s already well-developed arguments about affect, race, difference, and communications. However, because this book is mainly geared toward engaging with the mainstream constructivist side of IR theory, there may have been a missed opportunity to start a discussion about critical IR theory’s conceptualizations of agency and their potential lack of attendance to affect.

All in all, Ross’s new book *Mixed Emotions* is a refreshing take on the concept of agency for IR theory. Throughout his agenda-setting project, Ross investigates “the way social interactions intensify, harmonize, and blend the emotional responses of those who participate in them” and the significance of such processes for global affairs (p. 1). He does so in order to call attention to the practical implications of affect and emotion, which “have proven to be of great consequence for the actions of states” and, furthermore, which “the architects of foreign policy cannot afford to sweep under the rug” (p. 151). It is thus my contention that, because he so thoroughly and clearly recasts the concept of agency for IR, Ross’s book is an absolute must read for students, scholars, and foreign policy practitioners.

Note


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