Fear in International Politics: The Long Shadow of State

https://www.e-ir.info/2020/09/22/fear-in-international-politics-the-long-shadow-of-state/

JAYATI SRIVASTAVA, SEP 22 2020

Fear – real and imagined – is integral to human existence, be it fear of harm, pain, subjugation, annihilation, assimilation, defeat, cruelty, torture and the most important of all, of death itself. It is not the experience *per se* but the lurking proximity of something untoward and the unknown in future that engenders fear. Such cohabitation of fear in both the present and the future means that '…while the lived experience of fear may be unpleasant in the present, the unpleasantness of fear also relates to the future. Fear involves an *anticipation* of hurt or injury. Fear projects us from the present into a future' (Ahmed, 2004: 65, emphasis in original) and plays a major role in structuring the present.

In politics, fear works in a most insidious fashion, is used to invoke passions, sway public opinions, pit 'Self' against the 'Other' and scare people into submission to public authority as it tugs at the deepest and darkest corners of human mind and often conflicts with reason. 'No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain…' (Burke, 1764: 96-97), and hence lies in the realm of impending possibilities.

In international politics, fear seems to perform a twin function – one which results in response of the Self to augment material capability to overcome fear of the Other; and, also serves as the principal driver of war when the Other's growing power is feared. 'As two sides accumulate more power – which inevitably includes some power to harm each Other, they actually generate more fear between them. This predicament is a security dilemma–the drive toward security ends in more insecurity' (Tang, 2008: 452), creating a never-ending vicious cycle where fear begets fear between the Self and the Other.

This paper seeks to examine why fear, while being considered a key driver in international politics remains under-theorised [other drivers may include pride, duty, honour, interest (see Lebow, 2006). It also discusses different dimensions of fear that are brought to fore when conceptualised from the vantage point of individuals other than the state. Finally, it argues that mobilisation of fear often relies on deployment of various aesthetic mediums that act as powerful interlocutors for generating the desired affect although its actual impact is mediated by human agency and hence, cannot be deduced *apriori* and there may remain a gap between the expression of fear and its affect. In order to better theorise the role of fear in international politics, it is thus important to focus on the processes of translation between the narrative of fear and the individual agency.

Domain of the International: Where Fear Lurks in the Background

Mainstream IR based on rational reasoning has not theorised fear in international politics. The concept lacks definitional exactitude and is analytically fuzzy in major IR writings, perhaps because as an emotion it is not amenable to rationally driven, positivist frameworks that dominate the discipline. This is in tune with the lack of attention paid to the role of emotion in IR (Bleiker & Hutchison, 2008: 116). Besides, state centricity and dichotomy between the domestic and the international makes it difficult to locate fear as an explanatory variable since theorising fear requires focus on the emotion of the individuals, including leaders, rather than on amorphous and inanimate rational state actors or abstract structure of anarchy.

However, fear lurks in the background, as a given constant driving state behaviour as inextricable connection between fear and conflict/war, are drawn. Morgenthau alludes to fear when he argues that '[t]he intellectual and

Fear in International Politics: The Long Shadow of State
Written by Jayati Srivastava

moral history of mankind is the story of inner insecurity, of the anticipation of impending doom, of metaphysical anxieties' (Morgenthau, 1947: 9). He cites fear, insecurity, and aggressiveness, amongst the psychological causes of social conflict (Morgenthau, 1947: 185). According to Morgenthau:

[s]ince the desire to attain a maximum of power is universal, all nations must always be afraid … all nations live in *constant fear* of being deprived at the first opportune moment, of their power position by their rivals, all nations have a vital interest in anticipating such a development and doing unto the others what they do not want the others to do unto them' (Morgenthau, 1948: 155, emphasis added).

In Waltzian analysis, fear accounts for balancing behaviour as also security dilemma under anarchy where war always remains a possibility. Hence, political units must forever be wrapped in gladiators' avatars amidst fear of getting annihilated or dying as political units. Accordingly, Waltz says that under anarchy, '[a] self-help system is one in which those who do not help themselves, or who do so less effectively than others, will fail to prosper, will lay themselves open to dangers, will suffer. Fear of such unintended consequences stimulates states to behave in what is called 'balances of power' (Waltz, 1979: 118). In certain cases, fear of revisionist states, christened as rogue states, pariah states or states belonging to axis of evil (such as Iran, North Korea, Cuba, Iran, Libya, to name a few) is invoked to reinforce fear of the Other and justify coercive policy while revisionist actors including states and terrorist networks marshal fear to challenge the status quo (Mölder, 2011: 249). Labelled as dangerous, such Othered entities ought to be feared for their propensity to cause disruptions and thus require full might of the military security apparatus of the Self.

Liberal institutionalists' world view on the other hand talks about mitigating war and conflict under anarchy by developing cooperative mechanisms such as regimes and international institutions. Despite interest driven behaviour leading to cooperative action amongst states, fear in liberal institutionalism is very much a reality and is borne out of fear of cheating, free-riding, bad intentions, defection and reneging on the promises made by the states. As Kenneth Oye notes '… states confronting strategic situations [in a single play game scenario]… are constantly tempted by immediate gains from unilateral defection, and *fearful* of immediate losses from unrequited cooperation…'(Oye, 1985: 12, emphasis added) which can be mitigated '… by creating favorable conditions of play and by lengthening the shadow of the future' (Oye, 1985: 16).

Constructivists talk about social construction of threat that contributes to spawning or mitigating fear amongst states although they would face differentiated fear depending on where that threat is emanating from. The fear of an enemy would be different from the fear of a friend (you may in fact not fear your friend except fear losing the friendship!) which is going to be different from fear of a rival, to paraphrase Wendtian three macro-level logic of anarchy [Hobbesian (enemy), Lockean (rival), and Kantian (friend)]. This in turn is based on '… different kinds of roles in terms of which states represent 'Self' and 'Other', thus underlining that '… logic of anarchy can vary' (Wendt, 2003: 43) and hence, fear may play out differently in different situations.

None of these authors however are able to unpack either the meaning of fear or lay out the mechanics of its effective deployment and its impact without which fear remains not only an under-theorised subject matter in IR but also of little empirical value. In the absence of a clear matrix of fear or threshold of fear that needs to be crossed to invoke a reaction by the Other, it becomes difficult to accord it an analytical exactitude.

Such theorisations also remain steadfastly focussed on using the language of power and security of the realm as the foundational driver for acquisition of military and economic power and as a way of overcoming fear faced by the states.

Fear and Agency of the Individual: Towards Prominence?

Since fear of the Other constantly drives states in amassing material capability for themselves, individual fears of hunger, disease, poverty, etc.; and, most importantly, coercion by the state itself are jettisoned. Andrew Linklater rightly talks about dualism (insider-outsider/citizens-alien, domestic-international), that are '… often fostered or consolidated by fear and insecurity' as the bane for building '…transnational solidarities based on mutually intelligible

Fear in International Politics: The Long Shadow of State
Written by Jayati Srivastava

fears of pain and suffering …' (Linklater, 2011: 13), as fears faced by the states is all that matters.

The centrality accorded to fears experienced by states leaves the individuals at the service and mercy of states, especially during war time but also during peacetime. During wartime, individuals need be loyal, resilient and courageous and those who fight fearlessly as soldiers are valorised and venerated, as they persevere and ward off fear of defeat or annihilation by the enemy. During peacetime, they need to be both vigilant and industrious to secure the material capability of state and maintain order as during peacetime, fear may emanate on account of political disorder or anarchy within states caused by civil unrest, political violence and in extreme cases, civil wars. (Buzan, 1983: 26).

Unlike the mainstream IR theories which it critiques for its state-centrism and a tunnelled vision of security, critical security studies seek to foreground human agency and an expanded version of security. Booth thus argues that '[t]he only transhistorical and permanent fixture in human society is the individual physical being, and so this must naturally be the ultimate referent in the security problématique' (Booth, 2005: 264).The ultimate goal of human being is emancipation of individuals which '…in theory and practice is concerned with freedom from restraints of one sort or other' (Booth, 2007: 111).

The human security framework too makes individuals the main referent and talks about 'freedom from fear and freedom from want' and lists six interlocking concepts of security: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security and political security to achieve that goal (UNDP, 1994: 24-25).Seen through this lens, fear would emanate from denial or insecurity stimulated due to lack of any or a combination of these dimensions of security.

Fearing the State

This brings us to a very important aspect that is central: the fear of state itself. Here '… fear functions as a technology of governance: the sovereign power either uses fear to make others consent to that power, or civil society promises protection, and the elimination of fear, to ensure consent.' (Ahmed, 2004: 71). The fear of coercion by the states in both authoritarian and liberal states ensures compliance and subservience

… the fear and favor that have always inhibited freedom are overwhelmingly generated by governments, both formal and informal. And while the sources of social oppression are indeed numerous, none has the deadly effect of those who, as the agents of the modem state, have unique resources of physical might and persuasion at their disposal (Skhlar, 1989: 21).

Citing both the 'dangers of tyranny and war' that threaten liberalism, Skhlar goes on to say that war accentuates demands for loyalty and intelligence and results in return of torture on a colossal scale because of which '… somewhere someone is being tortured right now, and *acute fear* has again become the most common form of social control. To this the horror of modern warfare must be added as a reminder.' Liberalism of fear thus arose 'in the conviction of the earliest defenders of toleration, born in horror, that cruelty is an absolute evil, an offense against God or humanity … and continues amid the terror of our time to have relevance…' and seeks to secure '… freedom from the abuse of power and intimidation of the defenceless' (Skhlar, 1989: 27, emphasis added).

In fact, the distinct nature of the international gives state states legitimate power to use force in dealing with external enemy and purge any internal threats. The term security of the realm therefore allows states to appropriate more emergency powers to deal with existential threats, a process which scholars from Copenhagen School of security studies have termed as securitization which '…is constituted by the intersubjective establishment of an existential threat with a saliency sufficient to have substantial political effects.'(Buzan et al, 1998: 25).

… by saying "security," a state representative declares an emergency condition, thus claiming a right to use whatever means are necessary to block a threatening development…"Security" is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics. Securitization can thus be seen as a more extreme version of politicization (Buzan et al, 1998:21-23).

Fear in International Politics: The Long Shadow of State
Written by Jayati Srivastava

To give something the name 'security' or securitization of an issue has a performative aspect to it and is done through discourse and political constellation where'[s]peech acts are more than verbal communication; they are equivalent to actions'(Booth, 2007: 108) and are synonymous with militarisation of the issue (Booth, 2007: 164).

The literature therefore talks about:

…[s]ecuritisation as an articulated assemblage of practices whereby heuristic artefacts (metaphors, policy tools, image repertoires, analogies, stereotypes, emotions, etc.) are contextually mobilised by a securitising actor, who works to prompt an audience to build a coherent network of implications (feelings, sensations, thoughts and intuitions)about the critical vulnerability of a referent object,… by investing the referent subject with such an aura of unprecedented threatening complexion that a customised policy must be undertaken immediately to block its development (Balzacq 2011: 3, emphasis in original).

Securitization however remains a top-down, state-centric and elitist agenda (Booth, 2007: 166), making people passive recipient of the security discourse, bereft of any agency as it is not seen to be taking place in a dominance-free context but is dependent on a combination of coercion and consent (Buzan et al, 1998: 25), keeping fear of oppression and cruelty by the state alive.

As a result, even when spectre of war does not loom large, there has emerged an ever-growing basket of fears from biological warfare to cyber-attacks to information warfare, from illegal migrants to refugees, from environmental catastrophe to religion-based transnational terrorist attacks, diseases, pandemic and even asteroid and comet collision. 'Such fears seep into the consciousness of the body politic and generate self-perpetuating systems of ideological and material production and reproduction' (Lipschutz, 1999: 414). It creates the narrative of fear'authored and authorised by the state' and results in political economy of danger as '[r]eassurance against such fears requires, in turn, amaterial infrastructure to deliver the necessary "protection" …' (Lipschutz, 1999: 418-19).

States thus needs to be forever prepared to deal with any such impending fears not just by other states but by non-state actors too and hence, there obtains a permanent state of fear. The role of non-state actors in instilling fear amongst population came up particularly after the 9/11 terrorist incidence in the US making sure that '… no liberal should be able to forget that nonstate actors, operating within the borders of liberal states, can be as coercive and *fear-inducing* as states (Keohane, 2002: 39, emphasis added); '[t]he extreme fear here is that of terrorists armed with a nuclear weapon [which contributes to further] … undermining trust in the state's capacity to provide domestic security…' (Buzan, 1983: 27) and demands hyper-vigilant state. Such permanent state of exception or narrative of fear and the committal rise in state power has been met with a growing degree of scepticism given the propensity of states to use that very capacity against individual citizens.

This brings home the point that in order for fear to create the desired affect, it is often actuated through various mediums and therefore, it is important to focus on the mechanics of its mobilisations in which individual agency must remain the main referent just as it needs to be the main referent that needs to be liberated from fear.

Translating Fear

As an emotion, fear lies in the realm of untoward possibilities, of what could befall on an individual or a political community and hence, its deployment for political purposes is difficult to assess. Since it draws upon people's imagination to carry through the desirable impact, it is not just a one-sided deployment of communication by the power that be but requires adequate receptors or translators at the level of human agency to carry through or instil a sense of fear, especially when fear is not experienced but lurks in realm of many disagreeable possibilities.

Fear thus often relies on various aesthetic props to surface such as enactments, speech, stories, metaphors, images and idioms to create the necessary political impact. Ghosts, vampire devil, Satan, evil, horror, and, madness are some of the metaphors used to describe the Other which not only demonises the Other but also keeps the fear of such misdeeds alive in international politics. For instance,

Fear in International Politics: The Long Shadow of State
Written by Jayati Srivastava

The monster *par excellence* in international relations is Hitler. He epitomises evil in a way that compares with the Devil… From Pol Pot and Idi Amin to Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein, monstrosity is measured against Hitler's example. Hitler of course is not just a monster, he is also an exemplary ghost, an evil revenant. His ghost and the spectre of appeasement have appeared on numerous occasions: Korea, Vietnam, Yugoslavia, Iraq (Devetak, 2005: 634, emphasis in original).

Similarly, various speeches by President Bush described Saddam Husseinas a madman and a dangerous person, while Iraq with its the hidden weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and several other misdemeanours on human rights and democracy was nothing short of a house of horror. Similarly, Osama bin Laden kept hanging like a ghost before he was captured and killed by the American forces although his Al Qaeda networks keeps the ghost of Osama bin Laden alive (Devetak, 2005: 636) and by default, the fear of the impending terrorist attacks. Hence, the state needs to be in a permanent state of emergency as '[t]he audience is terrorised and made fearful not by the hypothesised terrorists somewhere "out there", but by the tales of fear and danger authored and authorised by the state and sources that are presumed to "know"' (Lipschutz, 1999: 418).

On the side, genre of horror film, fiction, war games, etc. keep such fears animated. It is said that '… aesthetic fear is not an authentic fear but an artful simulation of what is crude, inchoate, nerve-driven and ungovernable in life; its evolutionary advantage must be the preparation for the authentic experience, unpredictable and always imminent…In authentically fearful times, the aesthetic fear is redundant' (Oates, 1998: 176). But in ordinary times, aesthetic of fear serves a very important function of keeping the spectre of fear alive, which keeps lurking in human mind, to be used as a political resource when occasion so demands. In international politics this is occasioned at the time of augmenting the security apparatus and adoption of forward/offensive action.

It is also important to understand that while fear may be a part of human nature and hence, universal as an emotion, its experience by human agency is both relative and contextual. In other words, '… fear is felt differently by different bodies,…[and] the response of fear is itself dependent on particular narratives of what and who is fearsome that are already in place' (Ahmed, 2004: 68-69). So, a black body is likely to fear greater discrimination based on colour rather than a white body or a woman's body is more vulnerable and hence, the fear quotient is much greater as compared to a male body. Similarly, our individual predilection situated in historical contexts allows us to fear some people more than the others or condition our ability and resilience to overcome fear. This is particularly applicable in post-colonial contexts where black bodies are feared due to the '… very hostility of the white gaze' (Ahmed, 2004: 63), very much similar to the context of global war on terrorism where skull cap has become a symbol of fear on account of stereotyping and association of a particular religion with incidences of political violence and terrorism.

It means that mainstream IR theory needs to go deeper into the analysis of fear and the mechanics of its invocation to not only understand international politics better but to also theorise fear in all its complexity. This also means that the long shadow of state needs to recede and light on individual human agency need to be brought forth, which remains both the creator and the final receptor of the fear narrative.

References

Ahmed, Sara, 2004, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Balzacq, Thierry, 2011, 'A Theory of Securitization: Origins, Core Assumptions, and Variants', in T. Balzacq (ed.), *Securitisation Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*, London: Routledge, pp. 1-30.

Bleiker, Roland, and Hutchison, Emma, 2008, 'Fear No More: Emotions and World Politics',*Review of International Studies,* 34(S1), January, pp. 115–135, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210508007821.

Booth, Ken, 2005, 'Beyond Critical Security Studies', in Ken Booth (ed.), *Critical Security Studies and World Politics*, Boulder, Co.: Lynne Renner, pp. 259-79.

Booth, Ken, 2007, *Theory of World Security,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fear in International Politics: The Long Shadow of State

Written by Jayati Srivastava

Burke, Edmund, 1764, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* , fourth edition, London: R & J Dodsley.

Buzan, Barry, 1983. *People, States and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations* , Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books.

Buzan, Barry, Wæver, Ole and de Wilde, Jaap, 1998, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* , Boulder, Col.: Lynne Rienner.

Devetak, Richard, 2005, 'The Gothic Scene of International Relations: Ghosts, Monsters, Terror and the Sublime after September 11', *Review of International Studies*, 31(4), October, pp. 621-643.

Keohane, Robert O., 2002, 'The Globalization of Informal Violence, Theories of World Politics, and the "Liberalism of Fear"' in *Dialog-IO*, 1(1), Spring, pp. 29-43.

Lebow, Richard Ned, 2006, 'Fear, Interest and Honour: Outlines of a Theory of International Relations',*International Affairs*, 82 (3), May, pp. 431-448.

Linklater, Andrew, 2011, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Theoretical Investigations,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lipschutz, Ronnie D, 1999, 'Terror in the Suites: Narratives of Fear and the Political Economy of Danger',*Global Society*, 13(4), pp. 411-439.

Mölder, Holger, 2011, 'The Culture of Fear in International Politics -A Western-Dominated International System and its Extremist Challenges', *ENDC Proceedings*, 14, pp. 241–263.

Morgenthau, Hans J,1947, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics,* London: Latimer House.

Morgenthau, Hans. J, 1948, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Oates, Joyce Carol, 1998, 'The Aesthetics of Fear,' *Salmagundi* , 120, Fall, pp. 176-185.

Oye, Kenneth A., 1985, 'Cooperation under Anarchy: Hypotheses and Strategies', *World Politics*, 38 (1), October, pp. 1-24.

Skhlar, Judith N., 1989, 'Liberalism of Fear' in Rosenblum, Nancy L., ed., *Liberalism and the Moral Life* , Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Tang, Shiping, 2008, 'Fear in International Politics: Two Positions', *International Studies Review*, 10 (3), September, pp. 451–471.

UNDP, 1994, *Human Development Report 1994*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Waltz, Kenneth, 1979,*Theory of International Politics,*Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley. Wendt, Alexander, 2003, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

---

About the author:

Dr Jayati Srivastava is a Professor of International Politics at the Centre for International Politics, Organization and

Fear in International Politics: The Long Shadow of State
Written by Jayati Srivastava

Disarmament (CIPOD), School of International Studies(SIS), Jawaharlal Nehru University(JNU), New Delhi.