

Can the bereaved speak? Emotional governance and the contested meanings of grief after the Berlin terror attack

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Abstract

Emotions that run through relations of power are complex and ambivalent, inviting resistance and opposition as much as compliance. While the literature in International Relations broadly accepts emotions as an intrinsic element of power and governance, relatively little attention has been given to situations when the emotional meanings of “the state” are openly contested. This essay highlights a situation in which emotional meanings are contested, or what I refer to as affective sites of contestation: situations and events where rules and norms about the proper expression of emotions are challenged, resisted, and potentially redefined. It is the ambivalence and alternation of particular emotional meanings, which, I will suggest, makes emotions an object of contestation in world politics. Whenever “official” emotions are contested from “below,” “the state” itself, representing a national project, is called into question, potentially transforming the relationship between citizens and the state. Building on the works of sociologist Mabel Berezin and others, this essay develops the ideal types of “the secure state” and “communities of feeling” as analytical prisms to reconstruct the political contestation of emotional meanings, pertaining to how collective grief is expressed after a terror attack.

Keywords

Communities of feeling, contestation, emotions, governance, national grief, power

“Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o-er wrought heart and bids it break.”

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Introduction

That emotions matter for world politics is a widely shared observation and has been systematically examined. How emotions matter, however, is highly debated among scholars of International Relations (IR). Recent studies have centered on the notion of emotional governance, pointing to the need to understand the concept of the state not only as a political regime but also as an emotional regime that sets the norms of appropriate emotional expressions through feeling rules, enacted via official rituals and discursive practices (Bell, 2006; Bleiker and Hutchison 2014; Connolly, 2005; Edkins, 2003; Holland and Solomon, 2014; Hutchison, 2016; Huysmans, 2006; Solomon, 2012; Weldes, 1999; Williams, 2011). A related strand has been concerned with the micropolitical foundations that constitute larger IR categories, such as the state, unpacking “how macropolitics gets enacted, embodied, and embedded” in the affective dynamics that generate broader collective configurations (Solomon and Steele, 2016: 4). Some of these scholars explicitly recognize how emotional contexts assist in shaping the construction of crisis and discourses as “sites of affective investment” (Solomon, 2012). Fear and anger, for example, have been used by Western governments, especially in Britain and the United States, to manage the response to terrorist atrocities by projecting the image of the “secure state” as a route to return to normality as quickly as possible, raising false hopes that state action alone in the “war on terror” will remove the threat (Burkitt 2005; Edkins, 2002; Gammon, 2008; Hobson and Seabrooke, 2007; Sucharov, 2005). Such a perspective makes emotions an intrinsic element of power and governance in world politics.

However, these techniques of governance, and the state tools of emotional manipulation that accompany it, do not always work in practice. Indeed, they sometimes backfire and are met with strong resistance. This essay essentially picks up where others have left off: rather than asking how people affectively *invest* in the discourse and identity production of the state, I seek to explore how people affectively *contest* the mechanisms of emotion governance by the state. As I will suggest here, it is through the affective practices of everyday politics that the emotional meanings projected by the government become contested. Emotions have a complex pattern, embedded as they are in the multiple networks of social relations. It is the ambivalence and alternation of emotional meanings, which, I will suggest, makes emotions an object of contestation. To illustrate this point, this essay highlights a situation in which emotions become contested, or what I refer to as *affective sites of contestation*: situations and events where rules and norms about the proper expression of emotions and their meanings are challenged, resisted, and potentially redefined. Whenever “official” emotions are contested, “the state” itself, representing a national project, is called into question, potentially transforming the relationship between citizens and the state.

Cases in which “official” emotional meanings are openly contested have, so far, received relatively little attention in IR, despite entailing key insights about the substance and dynamics of affective structures in world politics.¹ The image and narrative of the state is constituted and governed by such an affective structure, that is, a set of feeling rules and emotional meanings that structure the emotional experience and collective identities of citizens. In times of severe loss, such as in the aftermath of a terror attack,

governments employ these affective structures to give moral guidance and reassure citizens via its powerful imagery, discursive articulations of strength, and rituals of unity and solidarity. Emotions have thus been found to be central to understanding the values and debates that emerge in response to a terrorist attack as they frame and enable the foreign policy choices that are made (Holland and Solomon, 2014; Hutchison, 2016). What remains less clear is how the emergence of resistance and contested emotional meanings impacts on these structures.

This study looks into the contested politics of national grief. Few studies in IR, if any, have carved out how communal grieving takes place in a contested space of diverging emotional meanings and interpretations in response to loss, how community members negotiate and wrestle with the proper ways to mourn, and how forms of “official” grief may be actively resisted (Brassett and Vaughan-Williams, 2012; Edkins, 2002; Fierke, 2004; Hutchison, 2016; Lindner, 2006; Schick, 2011). These studies have eloquently shown how grief can contest hegemonic emotional attachments and my aim here is to build on and extend its arguments. Specifically, I propose that studying the contested politics of national grief offers a prolific way to theorize and empirically analyze not just how collective images and emotional responses are managed and mobilized by state agencies but, crucially, how alternative kinds of emotional meanings contest the governing of emotional states of citizens, producing “enlivened” accounts of affective encounters between citizens and the state. I argue that collective emotions can subvert dominant (constructed) forms of emotional governance that are manifested by the state and this will be demonstrated with reference to collective grief. While the argument incorporates some of the broader conceptual points and processes at play at the macro-level, its main focus lies on the processes pertaining to the enactment of grief in a particular situation at the micro-level, namely grief in response to a terror attack.

To develop this argument, this essay proceeds in three steps. In section one, I examine the concept of grief in general terms, linking its psychoanalytical dimension to its social and political implications. In section two, I develop a framework of national grief to show how state-led emotional meanings of grief may be contested from “below.” In section three, I apply this framework to the case of the Berlin Christmas market attack in December 2016.

The social construction of grief

Grief is a powerful emotion. Such is its power that psychologists tend to view it as a basic and natural emotion of loss, located exclusively at the individual level. Popular notions of grief usually describe it as a very personal, private, and intimate response to an involuntary and irretrievable loss, particularly to the loss of someone or something that has died and to which an affective bond has been formed. By contrast, this essay understands grief as inherently socially shaped and controlled, transcending the boundaries between the private and the public as it is often collectively interpreted and enacted upon at the level of the state.

Psychological and therapeutical approaches tend to view grief as a personal “illness” to be “healed” by going through a “normal” progression of stages. From this perspective, grief gets “treated” as a universalized object of clinical work, mainly rendered to the private realm of the individual (Rando, 1984; Sanders, 1999). Constructivist and sociological approaches,

by contrast, criticize the psychological viewpoint for its narrow ontological focus on atomized individuals in sterile clinical settings because this separates the concept of grief from its undeniable sociocultural and historical context (Averill and Nunley, 1993). Moreover, therapeutic definitions of grief often stem from professional epistemologies and knowledge structures that are reified as real and imposed on the ‘client’s’ experience rather than being constructed from it. Hence, the extent to which psychological theories of grief can be transferred to “real” individual experience needs to be problematized. For example, as Lopata (1996) shows in her study on widowhood, there is a strong connection between the social construction of reality, on one hand, and feelings such as grief and loss, on the other hand. In contrast to psychological theories, she finds that neither notions of recovery nor progressive detachment from their deceased husbands featured prominently in the women’s experience. Constructivists have thus taken the study of grief out of the clinic and into the everyday experience of people within real-world social spheres.

This essay employs the constructivist position to study the contested politics of national grief. As pointed out above, constructivists highlight the cross-cultural variations and historical transitions of grieving forms. Much of the feminist and cultural studies literature focuses attention on the gendered and exclusionary nature of grief by studying the differentiation between legitimate and illegitimate objects of grief, lives that are “grievable” and “ungrievable” (Ahmed, 2004; Butler, 2004). For example, Abu-Lughod (1985) shows that while Egyptian Bedouin culture forbids public expressions of sadness or grief over loss, it is nevertheless acceptable to express them through aestheticized ways, such as songs or poems. Lutz (1988) outlines how grieving among the South Pacific Ifaluk is supposed to be intense but brief. Mourning takes place through continuous screaming and wailing for a day or so until the ritual suddenly terminates. Scheper-Hughes (1992), by contrast, finds that Brazilian Alto mothers categorically refuse to display sorrow or grief for the loss of their child. Stearns and Knapp (1996) reveal how Western conceptions of grief have shifted through time.

In IR, Jenny Edkins (2002) and Kate Schick (2011) provide fascinating accounts of how “rushed” mourning in the wake of traumatizing events, such as the state-led practices and images of September 11, tends to “gloss over” vulnerability and painful memories. Karin Fierke (2004) and Evelin Lindner (2006) demonstrate how grief is embedded in political communities, contrasting it to the potentially isolating and violent effects of trauma. In a Special Issue on “Resilience and (In)security,” James Brassett and Nick Vaughan-Williams show how grief can be managed and performed politically, thereby constituting communities. In a similar vein, Emma Hutchison (2016) brilliantly outlines the healing effects of grief after trauma to repair and reinvigorate communal attachments. While none of these studies precludes the possibility of contestation and resistance to socially prescribed forms of mourning per se, I suggest that their assumptions on the critical and contested nature of grief as a deeply politicized emotional meaning-making process can be taken a step further: How might we conceive of grief and mourning as a contested space in world politics and what would this entail? Why do actors rally against established modes of mourning and promote alternative displays of grief? How does the contested politics of grief produce political change?

To sum up, I suggest here two things. First, that grief is not limited by the phenomenological and cognitive realms of individual bodies. Its nature is, above all, inherently

social. It is through the social structuring of emotional responses to a valued loss in accordance with shared conventions that a group becomes conscious of itself and is bound together as a moral community. As one of the architects of the social construction of emotions, Emile Durkheim, points out,

mourning is not the spontaneous expression of individual emotions. [...] No doubt it may happen, in particular cases, that the sorrow expressed is sincerely felt. But more generally, there is no connection between the feelings experienced and the gestures performed by the actors of the rite. [...] Mourning is not a natural impulse of the private sensibility bruised by a cruel loss; it is a duty imposed by the group. They lament, not simply because they are sad, but because they are *obliged* to lament. (Emphasis added, Durkheim, 2001 [1912]: 295–296).

Second, while grief sustains communities by strengthening the social bonds among mourners and compensates for a crucial loss by allowing its members to intersubjectively disengage from the past and collectively turn toward the future, I suggest that this is only part of the story. Whereas the collective expression of grief may indeed help to sustain group cohesion and identity in times of uncertainty, its official suppression and silencing forms the basis for resistance and contestation, thereby undermining affective bonds of communities. In short, while the transformative potential of grief has been acknowledged in IR, its contested nature within public spheres remains to be explored. Before engaging with the notion and implications of the contested politics of grief, I will briefly develop the conceptual foundations of national grief.

The conceptual triad of national grief

Grief is a complex and ambivalent emotion. It consists of and is constructed from multiple other emotions that are either transitory or relatively enduring, such as sadness or sorrow over loss, fear or anger of being left alone, regret or guilt of not having spent more time with the deceased, envy or jealousy at other's seemingly happy lives, relief or joy of being freed from a "burden," sympathy or gratitude for the condolence and solidarity offered by others, and so on. In this sense, grief makes for a perfect candidate to study the contestation of emotional meanings in word politics. Because definitions of grief, mourning, and bereavement are often used interchangeably, a brief clarification is in order. Grief generally describes the individual and collective emotional response to loss, including its mental, physical, and social manifestations. Bereavement denotes the collective acknowledgment of a loss coupled with the expectation that grief will follow. Mourning refers to how grief is practiced through institutionalized rituals. Based on these definitions, I argue that the experience and expression of national grief can be conceptualized according to the type of loss, the nature of attachment and identity, and the culturally prescribed expression of grief or, in short, the grief culture.

Loss

Loss basically involves a disruption of continuity. As "the old" is lost, grief becomes part of the transition to a changed self (Marris, 1974). Some people may remain "stuck" in the

past resulting in prolonged grief or unresolved mourning whereas others may be forced to move into an unanticipated future and to reconstruct the self without the opportunity to grief (Volkan, 1997). The type of loss may involve the loss of animate objects (such as human beings or animals) as well as the loss of inanimate objects (such as places and cultural artifacts). While the loss of human life obviously invokes categories of grief, the loss of places and artifacts contains an implicit, though no less powerful, notion of grief in world politics. Displacement, forced relocation, and other forms of involuntary spatial change evoke intense loss and life disruption for human beings. Displaced persons and refugees may have escaped physical harm but are forced to cope with the challenge of building new human–environment bonds to feel secure in their new “home.” Temporal change in the form of nostalgia or irredentism induces similar discontinuities, such as perceptions of an “empire lost,” denied nationhood, or historical humiliation (Callahan, 2004; Fattah and Fierke, 2008). Finally, loss varies in intensity, ranging from fundamental loss resulting from traumatic events that unsettle the foundations of social life to less severe and more ambiguous forms of bereavement, both of which ultimately depend on the nature of attachment and social characteristics of the person or group experiencing the loss.

Attachment and identity

The nature of attachment refers to the existence and scope of meaning attached to animate or inanimate objects as sites of identification or identity anchors (Winter, 1995). Emotional attachment combines the individual and collective entitlement to grief because it is deemed appropriate as to relationship, timing, and type of loss (Charmaz, 1997). The opposite to entitled grief is the concept of disenfranchised grief, which speaks to issues of suppressing legitimate rights and deservingness of grief (Doka, 1989: 2002). Disenfranchised grief occurs when the loss is not acknowledged by society or cannot be publicly mourned because the state erects rigid structures to suppress public mourning. The Israeli psychoanalyst, Rena Moses-Hrushovski (2000), applies the related concept of deployment to interpret the unresolved Arab-Israeli conflict as an inability to mourn past events. In a similar vein, Gillian Rose (1996: 51) emphasizes the “impotence and suffering arising from unmourned loss.” When survivors are not entitled to mourn, “undue grief” remains silent and silenced: it becomes disenfranchised. For example, following the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, US state officials sought to manage mourning and recreate a state of normalcy simply by relabeling the grieving process of those who had lost their children in the attack as “post-traumatic stress disorder” if parents were not “over it” within 2 weeks (Linenthal, 2001). While grief may be disenfranchised along and within the boundaries of political communities, it is still grief. Disenfranchised grievers need what all grievers need—validation, support, compassion, empathy, and opportunity to speak out and engage in mourning ritual. While disenfranchised grief complicates grief because it limits the possibility to mourn, it can simultaneously inspire alternative forms of mourning that take place separated from and in opposition to socially prescribed forms of grieving. For example, Sara Ahmed (2004: 156) vividly describes how, following the September 11 attacks, a queer politics of grief challenged its exclusion through a “hierarchy of the dead,” purported in the US media, by extending the

national community of mourners and by publicly contesting attempts by officials to deny queer victims.

Culture

Culture influences what can be considered and recognized as grievable through so-called “feeling rules”: socially appropriate ways to experience and interpret the meaning of loss. It prescribes the traditions, rituals, and ways of expressing grief and how mourning is practiced (Hochschild, 1979). Such feeling rules are recognized and followed by members of a group. Feeling rules prescribe what is regarded as an appropriate emotional performance and what is not within a particular group. The individual process of internalizing the appropriate expression of emotions is called emotion work, which is the management of one’s inner feelings in order to conform to a particular sociocultural structure (Hochschild, 1979). A subset of these feeling rules directs grief. Grieving rules direct what losses we grieve, how we grieve them, who legitimately can grieve the loss, and how and to whom others should respond with empathy and compassion. These rules exist not only as informal conventions and religious traditions, but also in formal statements such as state policies that extend bereavement leave to certain individuals or regulations and laws that define who has control of the deceased’s body or funeral rituals.

Importantly, grieving rules are tied to social hierarchies and inequalities. Those actors that rank higher within a group are able to define the proper ways of mourning, which means that actors in the lower ranks will be forced to alter their performance in order to better adapt to the prevailing grieving rules. This is meant to say that inside a grief culture, members are not treated as approximate equals but are woven together in asymmetrical power relationships. The self-image and ideal of “the state” is formed based on the minority of its representatives. These social superiors perform a norm building function, which Hochschild terms “emotional authority,” by exercising power over potential or actual non-compliers through determining the grieving rules and by enforcing them via social control. The binding role of such emotional authority becomes particularly significant during times of loss. As Hochschild (1983) explains,

(i)n times of uncertainty, the expert rises to prominence. Authorities on how a situation ought to be viewed are also authorities on how we should feel. The need for guidance felt by those who must cross shifting social sands only adds importance to a more fundamental principle: in the matter of what to feel, the social bottom usually looks for guidance to the social top. Authority carries with it a certain mandate over feeling rules. [...] It is mainly the authorities who are the keepers of feeling rules. (1983: 75)

This is not to say, of course, that state authorities are immune to cultural influences. State leaders are themselves also emotionally regulated, through wider social processes that culturally constitute and engender their feelings and their emotional-political expression. Still, the way emotions are managed and controlled within society is significantly shaped by and reflects existing asymmetrical power relationships and hierarchies. Put differently, grieving rules—and the state authorities that define and interpret

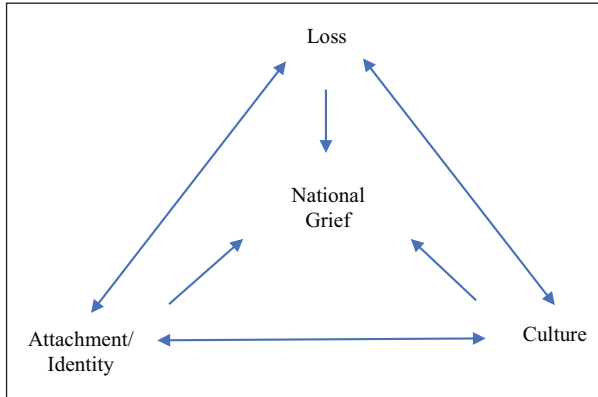


Figure 1. The conceptual triad of national grief.

them—provide an affective meaning structure through which individuals and communities view and morally judge their attachment and response to loss, such as after a terror attack. Having laid out the conceptual foundations of national grief, I now turn to the ways and possibilities of how state-led emotional meanings of grief may be contested from “below.”

To sum up, the conceptual triad of national grief forms an interdependent system, where each element strengthens the other: loss mobilizes attachment and identity while attachment and identity make loss meaningful. Culture, in turn, defines the meaning of loss and regulates attachment while both loss and attachment underpin the formation of cultural grieving rules (Figure 1). This suggests a lot of continuity and stability in this self-perpetuating system. This is not to say, however, that the conceptual triad of national grief cannot be undermined or reversed. In the next section, I will show how national grief may be politicized and thus contested.

The contested politics of national grief

As social constructions, emotions are contested by default (Holland and Solomon, 2014). Put differently, grief is not a natural response to a loss like thirst is to the craving for fluids. Rather, it is conditioned by its dependence on an evolving sociocultural context and highly sensitive to cultural forms of loss and identity. As such, the meaning of grief may be subject to resistance and reinterpretation due to its ambivalence and alternation within power relationships. As Martha Nussbaum (2001) notes, “a single event transforms hope into grief, as grief, looking about for a cause, expresses itself as anger, as all these can be vehicles for an underlying love” (2001: 22). In any loss there is a break in continuity, a revolutionary moment that disrupts the “normal state of affairs,” potentially threatening the bonds between the state and its citizens. Since the state is supposed to protect its citizens from harm, a terror attack will almost certainly call into question the legitimacy of the state. While state agencies, or other political groups, will attempt to manipulate emotional responses to quickly return to normality (and thus to regain

legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens), parts of the population may nevertheless seize the opportunity to promote political change. The contested politics of national grief illustrates how emotions work in both directions: as attempts by governments to govern and as public resistance to those attempts.

I suggest that grief becomes politically contested when individual or collective manifestations of attachment and identity conflict with culturally prescribed standards, emanating from the state-led governance and management of public emotional responses to a loss. Analytically, the contested politics of grief entails the complex interplay between, on one hand, “official” emotional responses of grief that are managed and mobilized by state agencies in response to a perceived national loss, and, on the other hand, alternative kinds of emotional meanings of grief that contest the governing of emotional states of citizens.

To incorporate both sides into a coherent framework, this essay employs the ideal types of the *secure state* and *communities of feeling* as analytical prisms to reconstruct the political contestation of emotional meanings pertaining to national grief. The distinction between secure states and communities of feeling draws on the works of sociologists Max Scheler and Mabel Berezin.² Both view the nation-state as a project rather than a fixed entity. Nation-state projects create emotional attachment and identity through compulsory participation in institutions, such as the military, education, and official language, as well as consumption of national images, words, and symbols (Berezin, 1999). The image of the “secure state” inspires confidence and loyalty in its citizens by constructing a “meaning-making narrative” that seeks to avoid ambivalence and shuts down alternative interpretations (Yoder, 2005: 37). The image of the secure state creates a “homeland,” a secure space, to overcome the multiple differences of previously separated entities, providing for the individual citizen’s ontological security. To be ontologically secure means to possess knowledge and receive reassurance from others regarding one’s place in the world, providing agents with a stable sense of who one is and where one belongs (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008). In exchange, citizens develop an emotional bond that makes them willing to defend the state under threat. The image of the secure state is thus rooted in the socio-psychological link between individuals as bodies of a state (parts), on one hand, and the state as the collective body politic (whole), on the other hand. This part-whole nexus is generated and sustained via emotional attachment to the nation-state project (Koschut, 2017). As William Bloom (1990) puts it, “the constituents of a state should form, or *feel* themselves to be, a ‘natural’ community concordant with the state” (emphasis added) (1990: 59).

In contrast to the image of the “secure state,” communities of feeling are collective emotional responses that generally lie outside the realm of state institutions. They bring together individuals in a bounded public space for a discrete time-period. Its members feel and experience in common, “not only the self-same value situation, but also the same keenness of emotion in regard to it” (Scheler, 1992: 54). Communities of feeling may express emotions either in support or against the nation-state project. To sustain emotional attachment and identification with the nation-state project, the “secure state” needs to resort to a single or to multiple communities of feeling. To do so, state institutions provide an affective structure that governs and aligns communities of feeling by channeling the emotions and organizing social groups via ritual enactment. As David

Kertzer (1989) suggests, rituals are formalized manifestations of “state emotions,” such as the infamous Nazi rallies, that kept this political regime in power.

As in any hegemonic structure, the possibility of resistance is always present. In this case, communities of feeling either living within or transcending state boundaries generate emotions that destabilize and possibly undermine the nation-state project. Communities of feeling may then turn against the state, for example, through social movements, protests, riots, or mass violence. Take, for example, the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo whose children were “disappeared” during the military dictatorship in Argentina. The mothers organized while trying to learn what had happened to their children and began to march in 1977 at the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, in front of the Casa Rosada presidential palace, in public defiance of the regime’s repressive state apparatus intended to silence all opposition. Another example is the death of Princess Diana in the United Kingdom, which stands as an illustrious example when an outpouring of public grief stood in stark contrast to the seeming coldness and lack of empathy on behalf of the British monarchy (Campbell, 1998). Considering current events, the upsurge of anti-immigrant parties and right-wing populist social movements in the United States, France, Germany, and elsewhere can equally be regarded as communities of feelings with grievances against the liberal nation-state project, appropriating the same repertoire of ritual actions (consumption of images, words, and symbols) adopted from state-sponsored events to use it against “the state” (Richards, 2013).

In this study, I suggest that such resistance by communities of feelings to state organized forms of emotional governance, and the subsequent channeling of emotional meanings in a new direction, creates sites of affective contestation. As the subsequent empirical illustration will hopefully show, the contested politics of grief can be analytically located within these sites of affective contestation.

In the event of a national loss, such as the collective loss of a feeling of safety and security following a terror attack (not to mention the loss of human lives), official attempts are made to manage public displays of grief in a way to present and project a powerful image of the nation-state project: the “secure state.” For example, consider how, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, President Bush framed national grief in a way that linked it to fear and anger, thereby marginalizing alternative conceptions of grief (such as guilt, regret, empathy, or compassion). This enabled the Bush administration to present the image of a strong and secure state at the sight of danger. Or, consider British Prime Minister Theresa May’s reaction to the horrendous attack at a Manchester concert hall:

I do not want the public to feel unduly alarmed. We have faced a serious terrorist threat in our country for many years. [...] And while we mourn the victims of last night’s appalling attack, we stand defiant. The spirit of Manchester—and the spirit of Britain—is far mightier than the sick plots of depraved terrorists. That is why the terrorists will never win, and we will prevail. (BBC, 2017)

In short, the relationship between “the protector” (the state) and “the protected” (citizens) is reconstructed through the emotional meanings of the secure state.

However, the meanings of the “secure state” exclude subjects from feeling and expressing emotions in alternative ways by drawing sharp boundaries between

acceptable communities of feeling and those that are unacceptable. Rather than working through diffuse encounters, the state acts as an emotional regime, directly impinging on subjects' feelings and modes of expressions, pertaining to deeply politicized questions over whose loss is valued and should be grieved or which forms of mourning are deemed appropriate and which are not (Schick, 2011). Within and between these strategic forms of emotional governance, alternative kinds of emotional meanings inevitably circulate in and through emerging communities of feeling whose rise may ultimately contest the governing of emotional states of citizens and, with it, the official meanings of the "secure state." In the following section, I will provide an empirical case of how such emotional contestation may play out in practice.

Empirical illustration: Contested grief and the Berlin Christmas market attack

On 19 December 2016, a Tunisian citizen, claiming to have been inspired by Islamic State, drove a lorry into a Christmas market on Breitscheidplatz, a busy junction in the middle of a shopping district in Berlin, killing 12 people and wounding over 50. The attack came amid public fears about an influx of jihad extremists resulting from Germany's admittance of large numbers of refugees. Unlike other European countries, Germans had not witnessed a terror attack on this scale in recent years, even though political leaders had certainly prepared themselves and their constituents for this horrible moment. Given this background, the immediate public response to the attack inspired a remarkable level of calmness and a seemingly quick return to normality. Soon, however, critical voices were raised. The ensuing public debate centered on the proper scope, shape, and meaning of national grief in response to terror.

The day after Anis Amri had driven a lorry into a Christmas market on Berlin's *Breitscheidplatz*, the streets in the normally restless, insomniac German capital were abnormally quiet. By the next morning, 12 people had died and 50 had been taken to hospitals, many of them seriously wounded or mutilated. In a show of respect for the victims, all Christmas markets were closed on that day. The city appeared consternated and shocked. In this emotional climate, the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, overlooking the Christmas market on *Breitscheidplatz*, and the Brandenburg Gate became important sites of silent mourning. Inside the Memorial Church, which had been severely hit by aerial bombs during World War II and whose ruins remained as a warning to future generations, a Bach choir had been rehearsing for Christmas inside the church when a few meters away, the deadly attack took place. The following night, large crowds quietly gathered in and around the Memorial Church for an ecumenical service to express grief and sorrow. Flowers and candles were silently placed at the site of the attack. Inside the church, all major political leaders, including Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Joachim Gauck, joined a group of religious leaders, including bishops, rabbis, and imams, to wordlessly commemorate the victims. Previously, Merkel had laid down a white rose on *Breitscheidplatz* while her spokesman issued a statement on Twitter: "We mourn the dead and hope that the many injured can be helped" (Berliner Morgenpost, 2016). Meanwhile, the German national colors were projected onto Brandenburg Gate. During previous terror attacks in other countries, the Gate had turned into a symbol of

collective grief, projecting the national colors of France or Britain as a show of solidarity after terror attacks had occurred in these countries. Now it stood as a symbol of collective grief for Germany. As President Gauck put it, Germany is “united in grief” (The Federal President, 2016). Yet, grief was to be expressed in a calm and orderly fashion or, as the German political magazine *Der Spiegel* (2016) put it, Germans appeared “completely unimpressed.” This credo was reiterated by Chancellor Merkel herself, when she praised the calm reaction of the German people in the wake of the attack: “In the last few days I have been very proud to see the level-headed reaction of the vast majorities of people to this situation” (The Federal Chancellor, 2016). President Gauck seconded this stance by reassuring all Germans: “The people can trust that the state will take resolute action to ensure security” (The Federal President, 2016). In short, German leaders appeared to successfully project the image of the “secure state” in the wake of a deadly terror attack with little interference or restriction.

Or so it seemed. After the immediate shock of the attacks had receded, many people began to openly question whether “the state” had emotionally engaged in appropriate ways with the victims of the attack. Survivors and family members quickly denounced the all too sudden return to normalcy, claiming a “lack of public grief culture” (Welt, 2017). One of them, Petra K, articulated her discontentment in an interview with the German newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* (2017):

I find the lack of respect and dignity on the part of the state sad and unworthy. The *Bundestag* (German national parliament) was not even willing to interrupt its Christmas break for a minute of silence. And politicians always declare that one should now quickly return to normality. But for us, there will never be such a normality again. [...] Everywhere in the world—in France, Israel or Turkey—the state mourns the victims of terrorist attacks.

As an example, she cited the large funeral procession for the Polish lorry driver, who had been killed by Anis Amri to obtain the vehicle used in the attack, in his Polish hometown: “The truck driver was buried in Poland with great interest. Here, there was a memorial service on the day after the attack. [...] Is this really supposed to be it?” (*Tagesspiegel*, 2017) Another survivor, Andreas Schwarz, also noted the lack of non-material compensation on behalf of German government officials:

I feel like the government has abandoned me. [...] What is going on in my head is dramatic [...] I wish for a public gesture of empathy [...]. This (lack of public mourning) is a sign of moral destitution and a disgrace for the federal government [...] simply disappointing [...] and sad. (ARD, 2017)

This perceived lack of adequate forms and expressions of national grief sparked a lively debate in the German media about the proper ways to mourn the dead of Berlin. A grand political gesture of grief seemed to be missing. To be sure, there had been a church service commemorating the victims along with numerous public statements and declarations of mourning by state leaders. Yet, to many these public expressions of mourning felt more like a political reflex or matter of duty rather than an empathetic and dignified expression of grief. As one opinion piece in the German weekly political magazine *Cicero* (2017) put it,

If it is true that dealing with their dead determines the state of a civilization, then ours is in bad shape. We have unlearned how to mourn. The common grief for deaths [...] is tabooed. [...] To all of them, the state and state governments say: personally deplorable, tragic, bad, but you have to cope with it alone [...] Silence is noisy, empathy dangerous.

Following a brief and mere dutiful public display of grief, mourning for the victims of the terror attacks on *Breitscheidplatz* had been quickly silenced and turned into a private matter. Granted, many of the victims and survivors did not want to be dragged into the media spotlight. Yet, the almost complete absence of images, names, and faces of the deceased undermined the ability of people to collectively identify with the victims. Citing privacy laws and data protection rules, German politicians deliberately avoided the production of such images. This stood in stark contrast to the response by governments in other countries to the same event. For example, Polish President Andrej Duda publicly knelt at the coffin of the Polish lorry driver, Lukasz Urban, in the Berlin terror attack. Italian President Sergio Mattarella took part in a moving funeral procession for a young Italian woman who had been killed on *Breitscheidplatz*. Yet, there were no such images of German politicians offering condolences to survivors or visiting the wounded at their hospital beds. Instead, hospitals (mistakenly) sent out bills to family relatives for performing an autopsy on the victims and insurance companies cited a German law on road traffic accidents to avoid having to pay higher compensation for the victims. Or consider how a lively debate ensued whether the lorry used in the attack should be returned to its Polish owner or put on display in a German museum while there was no mentioning of installing a commemorative plaque on *Breitscheidplatz* to remember the victims. Why was there such a reluctance to public gestures of mourning in Germany? Why were German state representatives so reticent? Did they not care or empathize with the victims?

While it is, of course, difficult to know for certain, the answer I suggest here is that German state officials apparently sought to contain public expressions of grief because these were regarded as potentially undermining the image of the “secure state.” Public outpouring of grief seemed to be interpreted by most state representatives as a loss of control and weakness. Such powerlessness stood in opposition to the powerful image of the “secure state.” The official order of the day appeared to be strength and resilience at the sight of danger. As German President Gauck warned in his address on the day following the attack:

We are now shaken, but these deeds do not shatter our convictions. We stand on a solid ground and we stand together, in Germany, in Europe and everywhere where people want to live and live in freedom. The hatred of the perpetrators will not lead us to hatred. He will not split our togetherness. (The Federal President, 2016)

Or consider Chancellor Merkel’s similar statement: “Even if it is difficult in these hours: We will find the strength for life as we want to live it in Germany: free, together, and open. We do not want to live with the fear of the evil paralyzes us” (Stern Magazine, 2016). Tellingly, when the German tabloid *Bild* placed the word “FEAR!” in large bold letters on its title page the day after the attack, its chief editor was immediately criticized for inspiring panic among the public. Grief, in sum, became a problem to be managed as

unobtrusively as possible. It is important to point out here that I am not suggesting that German state leaders personally did not care for the situation of the victims and their families. In fact, many state representatives (including Gauck and Merkel) privately visited survivors and talked extensively to relatives of the dead. What was largely missing, however, were public expressions and collective state representations of grief through images, text, or national rituals: photos and images of politicians holding hands with the victims, grand speeches, or a public funeral ceremony. As a result, individuals who experienced grief intensely felt that they were denied their right to mourn in public, having to suffer silently.

But many of the survivors, and those who did empathize with them, would not settle for this. Public outpourings of grief—expressed through tears, flowers, notes, gifts, and social gatherings at the site of the attack—stood in stark contrast to the public perception of a lack of empathy on behalf of state representatives. Those who bonded together against “the secure state” and its imagery desired to move into the public sphere and out of the silence to speak out about the painful aspects of everyday life for many people. As one victim put it, “there is now a point where we want to talk about our perspective. How we feel about this” (ZDF, 2017). I argue that this public contestation of grief as confined to the private generated a community of feeling standing in opposition to the meanings generated by the secure state. A community of feeling focusing on loss drew together a diversity of different subjects into a temporary collectivity that felt able and compelled to display grief and sorrow publicly. This community of grief (survivors, families of the victims, ordinary people, and members of the media) put immense pressure on state governance of emotions to display sorrow and grief publicly and thus to publicly empathize with the mourners.

These efforts were not without consequences. German state officials did change their policies, at least in parts. They soon began to project the image of the “empathetic state” that felt with its citizens. On 19 January (4 weeks after the attack), the President of the German Bundestag, Norbert Lammert, gave a speech to the members of the national parliament, the government, and diplomatic representatives from countries that had suffered losses during the Berlin attacks. In this speech, Lammert commemorated the victims of the Berlin terror attack and admitted to a lack of public grief:

It is one of the hard-to-avoid, but difficult to bear, mechanisms of the perception of such events by the media and the public that the perpetrator is regularly given far greater attention than those who were killed. The face of the murderer from *Breitscheidplatz* is known to all of us, we see it almost daily in newspapers, on the web and on television, and we know his life story in detail. Little is known about the victims. This is, of course, not appropriate [...]. (German Bundestag, 2017)

In a similar way, German President Gauck announced a few days later that he would invite family members and close relatives of the 12 victims who were killed in the attack to meet in his official residence at Bellevue Palace. The meeting represented a political reaction to ongoing criticism, pertaining to the appropriate levels and intensity of national grief in the wake of the terror attacks. In fact, the German Minister of the Interior, Thomas de Maiziere, vowed “to improve future communication of such types of events” (Deutsche Welle, 2017). Soon thereafter, the government appointed the former prime minister of the German federal state of Rhineland-Palatinate, Kurt Beck, as ombudsman

for the victims and survivors. In addition, the German government announced a project to install a permanent memorial on *Breitscheidplatz*. All of these public gestures appeared to undergird the image of an “empathic state” that publicly felt with the victims, in contrast to the image of the “secure state” that tells people how they should feel.

To sum up, the aftermath of the Berlin terror attacks constitutes a specific historical moment in which emotional expressions of grief could not be officially contained in the private sphere but instead spilled over into the public sphere, putting pressure on state institutions and officials to change their policies. Specifically, public expression of grief challenged the meanings of the “secure state” (the state as protecting), forcing state representatives to modify their imagery and presentation of the national self through public expressions of grief linked to empathy (the state as caring). In this way, the disruption and questioning of state-led forms of emotional governance generated affective sites of contestation: Disenfranchised grief formed the basis for the emergence of a community of feeling that demanded a public funeral ceremony and thus promoted resistance against the meaning of the “secure state.” Individuals on a large scale engaged in a process of collectively recognizing and articulating their feelings caused by catastrophe to create a space of civic engagement and the rearrangement of political affiliation. Through partial concessions and the forced projection of the alternative meaning of the “empathic state,” the German government was eventually able to save the ground it appeared to be losing.

Conclusion

This essay examined—conceptually and empirically—the idea that emotions can be sites of resistance that function to subvert the authority of the state. It demonstrates how collective emotions at the societal level can work to transgress political power and shape political priorities at the state level, rather than the other way around, as may be typically the case. In this final section, I will return to the three thematic interventions flagged by the editors in the introduction to this special issue and reflect on some of the broader implications of this essay for the study of IR.

First, the study adds to the variety of methodologies present within the study of emotions and IR. Precisely, it traces the public expression of collective grief within a specific sociopolitical structure at a particular time through its discursive practices and imagery. Put differently, I suggest that a social constructivist perspective of emotions needs to locate national grief not merely in its *invested* form but also in its *contested* realm.

The second theme concerns the relationship between individual and group emotional experiences and how this might influence and sit alongside high-power politics. Terror attacks like those of *Breitscheidplatz* are supposed to hit not merely individuals but an entire community, a whole nation. This is why it is understood as a signal against terrorism that the state, representing a national project, returns to normality as quickly as possible. What this view misses, however, is that there are people for whom this is not possible. These people were not only indirectly affected by this attack but were themselves victims who lost beloved relatives and whose lives were destroyed on 19 December. The unanticipated and extensive public outpouring of grief following the Berlin attack, and governmental responses to these, draw attention to a larger theoretical debate about how, when, and where collective emotions, such as grief, can and should be

expressed, what types and intensity of emotional expressions are appropriate and acceptable, and how we manage and govern them in a secular society.

Finally, the essay draws attention to the “everyday” effects and influences of emotions in world politics. Because many emotions, like grief, are ambivalent and alternating, they are neither predictable nor entirely susceptible to governmental manipulation, especially when facing severe loss of people and things we deem precious. The events surrounding the Christmas market attack not only reinforce how governments attempt to direct emotional responses toward the seductive meanings of security and protection. Significantly, they also add to our understanding of these mechanisms by showing how the affective technologies of government can produce the opposite effect of that intended. To study these effects, we need to look to areas typically at the margins of IR: everyday lived experiences of trauma, loss, and vulnerability and how different visual and aesthetic mediums help to capture those emotions as well as telling of and re-imagining new ways of understanding international politics. This makes the contestation of emotional meanings a central element in the study of world politics.

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Notes

1. Notable exceptions include Karin Fierke (2013) and Naomi Head (2016); Andrew Ross (2014: 9) depicts emotions as “a creative source of collective agency” that opens up opportunities for social change. In similar ways, Wesley Widmaier (2010: 135), drawing on Reinhold Niebuhr and Richard Hofstadter, argues that elite anxieties over mass sentiments may generate populist resentment.
2. While most elaborately employed by Mabel Berezin (2002), the notion of communities of feelings has also been used by Kate Nash (2003) and Raymond Williams (1961) as well as Emma Hutchison (2016).

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