



## The “Emotional” Amoral Egoism of States

By Nayef Al-Rodhan



### Introduction

In 1812 Napoleon Bonaparte, at the heights of his power, set out for the most adventurous, and ultimately fatal, military campaign. Napoleon’s Grand Army of over 500,000 men, the largest force ever mobilized to that date, was led to the lands of Russia. Historians have long investigated the misjudgements of this campaign and the question of hubris emerges as an underlying factor for Napoleon’s vehemence to pursue a disastrous campaign. Hubris is exaggerated pride, often combined with arrogance. Excessive confidence and reassurance, inspired from his established conquests and grandiosity, further inflated by narcissism, led Napoleon to conduct a military campaign that could be allegedly classified as irrational because it took place against the backdrop of a series of warnings and unfavorable forecasts from his lieutenants.

The motivations for setting to conquer Czar Alexander’s Russia were less driven by the geopolitical necessity of defeating a rival power as by the

impetus “to satisfy a hubris-infected personality” and an insatiable “hunger (...) for applause from others”.

### Rethinking the ‘rational’ in state conduct: state emotionality

Traditional theoretical accounts on the interaction between states have largely favoured the view of states as rational actors, attributing too little to the role of emotions. The Realist assumption that leaders (even elected ones) act predominantly rationally implied similar expectations on the level of states. This claim can be countered on several fronts. The state *can* be a rational, self-interested, power-maximizing actor, yet deconstructing the discourse on state rationality and state egoism, defined as the pursuit of national interests, paints a more complex picture of the facets of state conduct. This takes us beyond the established IR dogma about the state.

### State rationality: a contested intellectual history

#### 1. *From classic accounts to Enlightenment and Romantics*

The theory on the modern state is commonly traced back to Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, who defined the state as an aggregate of the plurality of all men “onto one will”. The modern state is described as a rational entity, necessary and instrumental to upholding law and order, and guarding against the demise to an infernal state of nature.

John Locke’s interpretation of the state was different in that the state of nature was a state of perfect freedom and perfect equality. Locke promotes an optimistic view of human nature where the state of nature is conducive to natural rights, teaching mankind not to harm others and not to live in relationships of subordination. Therefore, men form a government by consent, primarily for escaping the inconveniences of the state of nature but retaining the power to sanction the legislative when this contravenes the purposes for which they entered into society. This means that the state is never entitled to arbitrariness.

An optimist view of human history was also promoted by the epistemology of Enlightenment, which saw history as a progressive move towards a more rational world. The Romantics countered this with their notions of alienation, nostalgia, innocence and helpless estrangement from one’s self and from nature or God. Romantic belief therefore dismissed excessive rationalism. The Slavophiles, for instance, embracing the message of the Romantic Movement valued sacrificial abandonment. This antagonized the ‘Western mind’ that was in constant pursuit of happiness, hedonism and intellectual knowledge.

Nationalism, both civic and ethnic, values sentimental belonging but there is a fundamental difference in their view of the state and nation. The psychology of belonging inherent in ethnic nationalism is one of deep commitment and bias towards a romanticized and abstract notion of the ‘people’. The state would thus be born as an aggregate volition of a certain group, with common allegiances, and mirroring their sensibilities.

#### 2. *The national interest in International Relations*

The IR dogma has predominantly portrayed the state as a rational entity, which irrespective of contexts, could not afford to be led astray by emotionality in its international interactions. Rather, pragmatic and practical rationality is expected to guide a state’s conduct. Throughout the Cold War, when the discipline of IR gained prominence, Realism and Neorealism explored State Theory through the prism of self-interest and power politics. The works of classical realists like Morgenthau sidelined much of

the ideological component of political regimes, depicting inter-state affairs as obliging to a higher morality of state interests and survivability, which essentially meant minimizing risks and maximizing benefits.

However, many realists, including Morgenthau, did not understand interests and power exclusively in a strictly material sense but also as expressed through a diverse array of policies. For instance, imperialism or prestige can be pursued as part of the *animus dominandi*, the desire to dominate, which is the social force that determines political activity.

Other paradigms put forward views often based on parsimonious understandings of agents and structure. The deterrence theory was inspired by the methodology and tenets of economic sciences and therefore centred on rationalism and rational choice. Despite the fact that rationalist explanations were entrusted to explain, or rather reassure, Western leaders that the USSR would behave as a 'rational-actor' they proved inadvertent. This deficiency was first demonstrated when the USSR, having achieved nuclear parity, continued its build-up programme, prompting concerns that such strategic miscalculations were a symptom of the US strategy having been trapped in scientific and economic theorizing.

### **How do states 'feel'? The 'emotionality' of states**

Much of the IR dogma across paradigms, envisages states action and reaction on the international scene through a limited range of purposes. These alternate between cooperation and competition, and for realists in particular, they are pursued under a constant stress of survival and power maximization. The Realist-inspired narratives have reflected an anthropomorphized view of the state, inspired from a narrow understanding of human nature. This posited that fear, reputation and self-interest are the main motivators of state action. There has been, nonetheless, little revisionist literature on the Realist conceptualization of human nature and its reflection on inter-state and transnational affairs.

The parsimony on human nature that Realists projected onto states and their conduct in international politics requires reconsideration. My philosophy of *emotional amoral egoism* sheds a different light on human nature. This differs from either positive or pessimistic accounts in that rather than subscribing humans to one predominant characteristic (good or bad), it stresses the pivotal role of emotional and contextual factors which shape human behaviour and morality. I will first discuss emotionality and how emotions shape, sabotage or hijack certain political processes, and then examine amoral egoism as an alternate lens to analyze state behaviour.

Much more complex than what Realism mainstreamed as 'human nature', insights from neurobiology inform us differently about the building blocks with which human beings encounter whatever environment they are brought into. This nuanced perspective does not contradict the realist pessimism per se, or the possibility for egregious behaviour, but posits that alternative emotions are also possible and are part of the array of emotions and traits that characterize human nature. I argue therefore that man is an emotional amoral egoist, whose traits are partially determined by the environment, partially by survival-induced instincts and that these are experienced emotionally. Man is therefore not an entirely clean slate insofar as man possesses predilections which are coded by genetics and later influenced by the environment.

Emotionality and our emotional repertoire (pain, grief, shame, ego, pride, reputation, greed and so on) play a key role as motivator of actions. Furthermore, some negative traits are often inflated to maximal levels, especially in contexts where there are few or no checks-and-balance systems in place to keep leaders restrained. In authoritarian regimes, leaders can exercise power to virtually unlimited extents, which can lead to reckless and gruesome actions on their parts. As I have written before, power is addictive and manifests at neurochemical level through a reward circuitry of dopamine flow, the same transmitter responsible for producing a sense of pleasure. Leaders in positions of power will therefore seek at all costs to maintain those positions, which ensure the dopamine flow and of other neurochemicals and confer them the neurochemical gratification they need; in such instances, political transition is tediously slow.

As we approach the neurochemical and idiosyncratic aspects of human nature beyond simpler notions, this has implications for how we view and analyze states. The following sections are incursions into understanding and conceptualizing the state beyond the framework of 'rationality'.

#### *1. Emotional variations and the state*

##### *a. Strategic Culture*

Constructivism pointed to the different perceptions and historically-entrenched identities that belie a simplistic premise of rationality under which states always act for their survival or to maximize their power. It was with the advent of the Constructivist school that the paradigm of 'strategic culture' was re-energized, re-asserting the enduring and pervasive influence of culture, national histories and values on security and doctrines of military strategy. This paradigmatic liaison between constructivism/post-rationalism and strategic studies refined the understanding on state conduct by providing a more culturally-informed explanation of how strategic policies are constructed and why states opt for certain policies even when such strategic options would not necessarily correspond to 'realist' interests of maximizing power.

The recently flurry of confrontation between China and Japan regarding the Senkakus (or Diaoyu, as the islands are known to China) is also a strong demonstration of the emotionality of states. Whatever claims either side makes to the contrary the islands are of minimal strategic or resource value; they are instead symbolic of much older military conflicts between the two countries. The resources invested in the current disputes and the risks arising from the elevated tensions they have created already exceed any material or strategic advantage either side would gain from their outright possession. These activities are instead part of a much larger narrative in which cultural pride and historical grudges play leading roles.

##### *b. Habit*

Another angle to analyze state behaviour is through what Weber categorized as a key orientation of social action: tradition, manifested through the habituation of long practice. Habit, as a promoter of status quo, has a powerful function in social life. This assertion takes us further away from the minimalist interpretation of state behaviour. Cognitive neuroscience, including social theorists from Weber to Bourdieu, has recognized that humans act, most of the time, habitually, not reflectively. Both at

intrastate and inter-states levels, habits play critical roles in mitigating uncertainty, providing a sense of order and entrenching patterns of cooperation or enmity.

The roles of routines and automatisms in social life and the human psyche have most been relegated from the domain of politics, a field abstractly reserved to institutions and individuals that assumingly value the virtues of agency and rationality. However, the social(izing) structures and milieus from which habits are carved, cover a wide spectrum: from systemic cultures or security communities (such as within the north Atlantic security community) to strategic cultures and state bureaucracies (for instance, the cult of the defence held by Chinese elites). In international politics, the logic of habit can explain how enduring patterns of enmity resist. F.W. Wayman identified 28 rivalries that endured for more than a century, from 1816-1986. Habits can, of course, be changed or be broken but their relevance in social and political life is no less conspicuous.

### c. *Symbols and metaphors*

Numerous events and turning points in world history cannot be understood without looking into their emotional motivators. After all, nationalism is a story of emotions *par excellence*, with folklore, myths and sentimental forms of attachment, even more so when it found centralized expression such as the 'state nationalism' of Prussia in the 19th century.

Nationalistic rage harboured within collective groups has often found expression in symbolic gestures. A sense of revenge and historic justice for Germany accompanied Hitler's choice of the Compiègne Forest as the location for signing the armistice that meant the defeat of France in 1940, the same spot where in 1918 Germany had signed the armistice that confirmed its humiliating defeat. For further emphasis, Hitler ordered the armistice to be signed in the same railway wagon in which the previous armistice had been signed.

The role of emotions in international politics conspicuously transpires nowadays and has become concretized in inter-state policies and mundane routines, in fears and anxieties that reverberate through policies of differentiation and Other-ing. Emotions are central in today's globalizing world and our relationship with the Other(s) is more essential than ever. This is also evident in the over-dramatic excesses like torture, dehumanization, and securitization of cultures that resulted from the criminal acts of terrorism on 9/11. Beyond a 'real' terrorist threat, the global 'war on terror' was also a deeply emotional and emotive statement effort to counter the sense of vulnerability that hit the West after 9/11. Moreover, the terrorist attack was particularly terrifying as it represented a physical *and* a metaphysical attack: it demolished in less than two hours the Twin Towers, the symbol of US power and capitalism. It was an attack on New York as a symbol of contemporary Babylon and not only on America but also the *idea* of America and the West. As such, an act of mass murder was played on an ancient myth: the myth of the destruction of the sinful city.

Humiliation is another strong catalyst of tension between states, often acting on nations as it does on individuals, reinforcing the instinct of competition and mutual animosity. The history of Israel and the Palestinians cannot be understood without its underlying emotionality. The cumulative historical anger and insecurity (appropriately felt by Jews due to unspeakable injustices committed against them in Europe) is repeatedly sabotaging the peace process and the very long term national interest and survival of Israel. Divisions within the Palestinian community and interference by regional actors, mostly with emotional foundations camouflaged in geopolitical terms, is also not helpful.

This is compounded by the emotional deep mistrust felt by people in the region of Western states as impartial honest brokers. This mistrust is often linked to vivid memories of the Crusades, Sykes-Pico, the Suez Crisis in 1956, and the more recent invasion of Iraq in 2003. There is also an ongoing perception that the West is intent on weakening Islam as a rival ideology by securitizing it and subjugating it as a culture.

Throughout the history of the Middle East, emotions such as humiliation, shame, hubris, vengeance and various symbolic gestures were and continue to be quite visible. At every point in the troubled history of the region, strong emotions punctuated inter-state relations and had decisive impacts on the peace process specifically and regional stability in general.

There are many other examples like this that include persistent Russia-West antagonism, Arab-Persian divide, India-Pakistan, the two Koreas etc. It is also worth remembering that these kinds of emotional schisms also existed in Europe for Centuries leading to numerous wars from the Thirty Year War to the more recent two world wars.

### 2. *The amoral egoism of states*

States, as humans, are of course egoistic and survival-oriented, pursuing self-interest and self-serving actions. However, the range of moral choices and actions are more diverse as material and idiosyncratic circumstances complicate state biases and actions. This is clarified by the "amoral egoistic" aspect of the theory. Again, insights in neurochemistry bring different perspectives about human behaviour and moral development, challenging previous theories about morality in society and in the international arena.

In this regard, I previously advocated the idea of a *predisposed tabula rasa*, which posits that the human mind is rather amoral as it does not have intrinsic conceptions of moral and immoral and is predisposed along certain evolutionarily-informed instincts that are necessary for survival in any given circumstance. Therefore, because the individual's first drives are instinctual and therefore egoistic and survival-oriented, the acquisition of a moral compass and moral sympathies require very specific conditions that enable such principles. A context which puts to test an individual's survival needs (such as deprivation, fear, humiliation, injustice or insecurity) will make the incentive for moral behavior secondary. Moral predispositions are not present by default but rather promoted by circumstances which encourage and permit moral actions to emerge.

### **Implications and Policy recommendations**

As humans are subject to varying external conditions, the propensity for rational or irrational behaviour is moulded by fluctuations in their environment. The parallels with states in international politics imply that state behavior is also greatly influenced by its surrounding circumstances and therefore cannot be characterized as intrinsically 'good' or 'bad'. An appreciation for the amoral, emotional nature of states and their vulnerability to circumstance complicates traditional

interpretations of IR, including some game-theoretic accounts where rationally self-interested—and therefore predictable—actors are taken as given.

A possible solution to mitigate against excessive emotionality in international politics would be to be guided by symbiotic Realism, an IR theory which postulates that in an anarchic, yet deeply interconnected and interdependent world, a pragmatic win-win approach is the most desirable option. Such is also the dominant feature of the US-China relations. The two countries have very distinct strategic cultures, one rooted in Sinic tradition and the other in 'universal' values, but their 'exceptionalisms' are very unlikely to clash. Rather, their level of interdependence compels them to take into account the larger picture and not give in to inescapable antagonism or competitive motivators. Given the deep interdependence between the two, they can only benefit in the long term by remaining pragmatic and in a relationship that essentially mirrors symbiosis, which in nature refers to a prolonged association that is mutually beneficial.

Symbiotic realism is a theory which accounts for the neurobiological substrates of human nature, as well as for the particularities of the world we live in: anarchic, yet characterized by instant connectivity and deep interdependencies. It also enlarges the number of unitary actors to include such emotional issues as large collective identities, and gender issues as well as reactive actors like climate and resources. As a guiding paradigm, Symbiotic realism argues that state interest must now be accommodated within frameworks of cooperation that balance between power-maximization and the reality of a very complex global system, populated by actors that operate at multiple levels both *below and above* the national level.

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