

## Book Review

Andrew A. G. Ross

*Mixed Emotions: Beyond Fear and Hatred in International Conflict*

Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press

Reviewed by: Howard A. Doughty

Fear, hatred and international conflict are all big issues. When combined not only in the abstract, but also in images searing what's left of our eye-patches through instantaneous and, incidentally, decontextualized locations, we need to be careful not to jump to conclusions.

For example, when this book came to my attention, I thought of the infamous date, "9/11."

The conclusion to which many of you might already have jumped is that I was referring to the day when terrorists attacked America, bringing down the World Trade Center and killing thousands of people in an unconscionable act of willful slaughter which spilled blood in New York City, Washington, DC and a farm in Pennsylvania. If that was your conclusion, you were wrong. I meant instead an event almost three decades earlier when a democratically elected president (whether through murder or suicide remains uninteresting) was ousted with the connivance or the collusion of Richard M. Nixon, then President of the United States of America. The year was 1973. The victim was the President of Chile, Dr. Salvador Allende. The ultimate death toll in the murderous *coup d'état* was about seven times the number of innocents killed by al-Qaeda in 2001 or who have died as US soldiers in the endless "war on terror" ever since ... (never mind the hundreds of thousands who have been rendered homeless, been maimed or have been killed in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere ... but who's counting?)

Gaza hospital staff learns to become masters of innovation Headline, <i>Toronto Star</i> July 21, 2014
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I was also reminded of some "cables" (remember them?), copies of which were published in the Canadian journal, *Last Post* (remember it? No, not the official publication of the Canadian Legion, but the non-sectarian leftist magazine that flourished for a time, mainly in the 1970s). The communications were sent from Santiago to the government offices of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. They were written by the Canadian Ambassador to Chile at the time (I am pretty sure that his name was also Andrew Ross—small world). Canada's emissary said that General Pinochet and his associates had accepted a "thankless but necessary task." I was disgusted. I don't think that the author of this book is the same Andrew Ross. I hope not. Anyway, call my disgust an emotional response. Call it "affect."

## I

The word became important, not merely among high school curriculum consultants, but also among legitimate anthropologists (Goldschmidt, 2005). It will pop up again here.

Meanwhile, from the sharpening of the first spear through the mounting of the first chariot, and on to such medical advances as blood transfusions, vaccines and prostheses for severed limbs, and on further to the civilian applications of military inventions related to global positioning systems, microwave ovens and duct tape, it would be possible—if somewhat bizarre and not a little grotesque—to interpret warfare as an overall benefit to humanity owing to the stimulus it provides for clever new methods and technologies.

If war promotes human understanding and encourages the development of sciences such as chemistry, physics and technological and commercial products from the Internet to Velcro, it challenges human understanding with regard to itself. No matter what half-baked theories of human nature are advanced by theologians, social scientists, geneticists and evolutionary psychologists to describe and explain our species' penchant, not merely for murder, but for increasingly indiscriminate killings on mass and sometimes genocidal scales, the fact remains that aspirant empirical scientists and methodical historians have failed rather miserably to explain why we do what we do to our fellow humans—never mind our fellow creatures who, we might one day appreciate, are also important parts of the biosphere we inhabit ... I digress.

## II

After World War II, when the grisly toll was taken, an inventory of acts of indescribably senseless cruelty caused at least a few of our philosophical and social scientific predecessors to sit back, reflect and think as seriously as they could about the causes of war. Alas, they didn't achieve a great deal in terms of an explanation of this enduring aspect of human behaviour that had only been made more hideous by our technological proficiency. Still, they did what they could.

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Their failure wasn't, of course, for lack of trying or even from want of financial support from entities such as the US Department of National Defense. Soon after the defeat of "Nazi" Germany, critical theorists and rigorous social scientists sought to find both psycho-social determinants and also innate propensities for aggression.

Some popular writers called us "naked apes" (Morris, 1969) and spoke of our inherent "territorial imperative" (Ardrey, 1966). They claimed we were instinctive killers and driven by intrinsic territorial lust. We were, they said, violent in our defence of our own lands and

properties (certainly including slaves and probably including women) and also in our ageless aggression toward others. It was *original sin* with a veneer of biology (Lorenz, 1967). It was humanity in the raw (a dreadfully admirable thing according to early modern thinkers in the tradition of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and contemporary “red-in-tooth-and-claw” anthropologists like Napoleon Chagnon (Doughty, 2011).

Rudy Rummel’s discovery that democracies don’t go to war with each other is “the closest thing we have to a scientific law in international relations. – W. J. Levy

When such essentialist arguments failed (less for want of compelling evidence of our murderous exploits, but from a lack of coherent and convincing explanation), authentic, certified social scientists came forward. Some (Adorno, 1950) applied the tools of modern psychology, and came up with some plausible hypotheses about personality types that were predisposed to follow orders—no matter how vile and inhumane those orders may have been.

Others showed how social circumstances can influence isolated individual actions and make people perform acts of cruelty that they might never have contemplated on their own (Milgram 1967, 1974)

Still others focused not on individuals, but on aggregates. Starting with academics such as Karl Deutsch (1953) and, working through to statistical wizards in the following decades, the effort to address international and intercultural relations became one of dispassionate empirical inquiry into the facts and sophisticated methodologies such as factor analysts to facilitate scientific descriptions, analyses and explanations of large-scale conflict.

Sometimes, it seemed that we were on the cusp of a breakthrough. In 1988, for instance, Rudolph J. Rummel advanced the promising hypothesis that democratic states were less likely than authoritarian states to wage war against one another. What seemed to be confirmed by laborious, methodical and well-funded study by a small army (so to speak) of underpaid research assistants was that democratic states were less likely to declare war on *each other*. So, it seemed that Australia and New Zealand, for example, never tried to conquer or destroy each other or to attack Norway. So far, so good!

While it wasn’t much, it was something and it was certainly enough to convince J. S. Levy (1988) to boast that Rummel’s discovery was “the closest thing we have to a scientific law in international relations.” Of course, it didn’t help to explain international conflict prior to the age of democracy—say, prior to World War II when Rummel’s explanation of international conflict did not apply to the great imperial powers (or lesser aggressive powers) or earlier when Europeans slaughtered one another in vicious wars alleged to be all about differences of opinion about the proper way to worship the Christian god. Then, quite obviously, the number of formal democracies was small if, indeed, any nation could claim to be anything akin to a democracy in the modern sense of the term. Nations, it was clear, mainly fought with one another regardless of their specific political arrangements. The democracy hypothesis has very little to say about *them*.

Moreover, although it is possible to quibble about what defines “war,” it is also plain that the United States of America—arguably the most important liberal democracy in the world—has

been engaged in some sort of overt or covert military action abroad almost without a break since 1941. The fact that it has not picked a fight with the United Kingdom, Switzerland or Denmark bears out Rummel's thesis that democracies don't generally go to war with one another, but it hardly explains why they *do* go to war (which they regularly do) though often in opposition to putatively democratic regimes.

After all, there is no small number of democratic Latin American countries which have felt the force of American hostility when they dared to overcome authoritarianism and choose or to seek to maintain some measure of liberty and justice; for example, Guatemala in 1954, the Dominican Republic in 1965, Chile in 1973 and Haiti in both 1991 and 2004, or (most likely) in Honduras (2009). Perhaps Rummel's *dictum* should be that mature, economically advanced liberal democracies rarely war with each other; but, if that's the limit of scientific law in international relations, it is rather a small thing. No doubt citizens of Luxembourg and Canada will sleep soundly in their beds, but others might do well to beware.

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The conundrum has remained essentially unresolved for decades. According to Andrew A. G. Ross, the reason for our lack of understanding is that we have begun from the wrong starting point. Even if the modern Hobbesian theorists of innate aggression are correct in believing that humanity is an irredeemably warlike animal, their position is so broad that it makes it impossible to determine why we are not *constantly* at war or to explain specific conflicts in terms of an inborn predisposition to violence. On the other hand, if we take the alternative view, imagine with von Clausewitz that war is merely “politics by other means” and think that human military adventures follow the logic of rational self-interest, the most recent warfare is either a spectacular refutation of the principle that reason has anything to do with it or evidence that absurdly irrational notions (ideological, religious, tribal-cum-national bigotries) have been used with cunning and wit to make whole populations succumb to glorious falsehoods in the interest of “rational” stratagems that are never to be revealed.

### III

In Ross' view, we are on more solid ground when we interpret international relations and the conflicts that occur within them as *affective*, rather than rational and narrowly self-serving. This, of course, demands a consideration of human agency and freedom of choice greater than the mere playing of games of advantage from which we cannot, by nature, withdraw. It also compels a somewhat better definition of “affect” than Ross is prepared to supply

Ross argues that attempts to understand international relations from almost any disciplinary or multidisciplinary vantage point—international security, global governance, political economy—must take into account normative issues related to promoting human rights on the one hand and tactical matters of enhancing security or enabling expansion on the other. Ross is especially interesting when discussing how international norms of behaviour are

generated, maintained and extended. In considering the dissemination of norms as vital to the concept of agency, he invites us to take a subjectivist position. This, of course, is nothing new. The preference of historians and political theorists has long been to privilege individual and collective autonomy and volition. Ross, however, means something more than this.

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Where Ross differs from the mainstream is in his assessment of the grounding forces that bring forth decisions. From the European Enlightenment to modern game theory (McDonald, 1950), the distasteful “prisoner’s dilemma” (Poundstone, 1992) and the rational choice model that’s the current (somewhat belated) fashion in economics, a presumption of human rationality and a notional assumption of egotistical self-interest have guided both policy analysts and policy makers in most liberal democracies and therefore in most contemporary social science.

The brittleness of the assumptions behind these approaches is obvious to anyone who ponders the genocides that have been occasioned by the invocation of religious, ethnic, national or other rationales for anti-intellectual hatreds and the physical butchering of our zoological kith and kin. It ought even to have perplexed the most doltish of dispensers of euphemisms such as “ethnic cleansing” to describe what are plainly pathological acts that might, in retrospect, lend some credibility to those who describe human nature in the most barbarous terms.

There’s also more to it than this. Ross, like some conservative thinkers before him (Oakeshott, 1962), rebuffs the notion of human beings as creatures of reason and argues that rationality places well behind emotion as the primal element in human agency. Moreover, this appeal to the primacy of emotions does not imply that the results are bad. Empathy and sympathy can be construed more far more likely to produce humane social relations than rational egotism and the calculated striving for advantage. Ross, however, chooses to look at the worst of our actions straight on.

The method he chooses to make his case allows the exploration of some of the more hideous events in recent years—terrorism in all its forms, the aforementioned “ethnic cleansing” in what is also euphemistically called the “former Yugoslavia” and the still vivid genocide in Rwanda. He combines sophisticated theoretical speculations with insights garnered from anthropology, sociology and even neuropsychology to come up with some surprising interpretations. He probes behind superficial stereotypes of the perpetrators of violence to reveal limitations on our own perspectives. He also invites us to understand that, just like the reliance on a concept of rational, self-interested and self-contained agency, *real* people do not so much act from the inside out, imposing our desires and purposes on an exterior world, as by internalizing social conditions and cultural attitudes.

We call not just upon our rational minds, but involve “the activation of the insular cortex and limbic system” and extend to the whole of our corporeal being. Energized by “affect,” we emerge as far more than abstract ghosts in organic machines; rather, we are our *whole* bodies and

we are also bodies in social contexts. We incorporate our capacity for agency through what he calls a “circulation of affect” that does more than dryly define our identities and personalities insofar as they are socially constructed through communicative processes known to all students of developmental psychology and early childhood socialization. It is this far less cerebral, but far more complete account that he substantiates through case studies that reveal patterns of behaviour that cannot be squeezed into the eviscerated models of standard social science.

There are practical as well as theoretical implications in *Mixed Emotions*. Ross takes the concept of affect well beyond the pale and often debilitating thought and language of conventional theorizing. He draws on unusual sources—from Frantz Fanon to bell hooks and whole retinue of postcolonial, feminist and otherwise marginalized thinkers—to address a variation of Deleuze’s *la différence*, but to do so in a manner that stays several steps ahead of traditional ideas of agency as they appear in standard expositions of political science’s treatment of international conflict.

Without emotions to select from a broad array of possible problems and to highlight facts relevant to them, our actions and reflections lack motivation, force and urgency. – Andrew A. G. Ross
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The combination of subtlety and complexity that Ross draws from his understanding of framed psychology produces an understanding of “distinctive forms of social action, for which standard models of agency are not well equipped.” Particularly now, when engaged experts and casual observers can easily detect an abandonment of Enlightenment assumptions among “fundamentalists” of every religion and ideology, it may be time to realize that the strategic thinkers, tactical planners and cunning terrorists on *all sides* of chronic global disarray can no longer be shoehorned into convenient bi-variate tables and minimax solutions. Sloughing off the reassuring but increasingly unlikely belief that we (and our putative leaders) actually *know* what we’re doing and beginning to probe into the repressed corners of emotion, precognition and authentic individualism read as subjectivity. Ross’s project is reminiscent of the words made famous by John Maynard Keynes (1964: 383) as he was closing his iconic text and gave flight to some wholly non-materialist sentiments:

... the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.

In rooting around in the netherworld of feelings and passions and in regarding reason as not much more than a veneer covering the pulsating fevers of lust and love, Ross may be opening up the doors of perception, Pandora’s peculiar box or just a can of fetid worms; whatever it is, in light of the evident *irrationality* of the confluence of pathological zealots and what C. Wright Mills called “crackpot realists” run amok, we could do worse than to contemplate our various demons and expose our primordial passions. At least then we would begin to know a little more about what we’re up against and, if fortune smiles, take a few rehabilitative steps toward sanity.

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