'I wasn't angry, because I couldn't believe it was happening': Affect and discourse in responses to 9/11[1]

TY SOLOMON*

Abstract. While the recent interest in affects and emotions in world politics is encouraging, the crucial relationships between affect, emotion, and discourse have remained largely under-examined. This article offers a framework for understanding the relations between affect and discourse by drawing upon the theories of Jacques Lacan. Lacan conceptualises affect as an experience which lies beyond the realm of discourse, yet nevertheless has an effect upon discourse. Emotion results when affects are articulated within discourse as recognisable signifiers. In addition, Lacanian theory conceptualises affect and discourse as overlapping yet not as coextensive, allowing analyses to theoretically distinguish between discourses which become sites of affective investment for audiences and those that do not. Thus, analysing the mutual infusion of affect and discourse can shed light on why some discourses are more politically efficacious than others. The empirical import of these ideas is offered in an analysis of American affective reactions to 11 September 2001.

Ty Solomon is currently Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg. His research interests include international relations theory, American foreign policy, critical security studies, and contemporary political theory. He has previously published in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* and *Political Studies Review*.

Introduction

It can no longer be claimed that the field of International Relations (IR) neglects the role of affects and emotions. Within the last few years there have been a growing number of scholars concerned with the role of affects and emotions in world politics. While some scholars have focused upon the roles of specific emotions,[2] others have explored the theoretical and methodological challenges that affects and emotions pose to scholars.[3] Furthermore, affects and emotions have

---

variously been conceptualised as strengthening cognitive beliefs,[4] as internal conditions that may be related to cognitive, biological, or behavioural states,[5] as undermining rational decision-making,[6] and as socially constructed.[7]

Despite this wealth of insights, a crucial issue in this literature has gone unexplored. Accepting Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison's contention that 'examining [their] representations is as close as we can get to understanding emotions', the study of affects, emotions, and their linguistic representations should take centre stage.[8] Of course, the study of linguistic representations has been a part of the discipline for some time.[9] In this sense, the relationships between affect, emotion, and *discourse* should be a central focus of this new literature. Accounting for the relationships between these phenomena would prove not only theoretically productive in terms of more fully understanding their interweaving, but also empirically fruitful in understanding why audiences become more affectively or emotionally invested in some discursive representations rather than others. Put differently, analysing the relationship between affect, emotion, and discourse suggests not simply that affects and emotions are socially and discursively constructed, but points to why some discourses are more appealing to audiences, and are more politically efficacious, than others.

I analyse these yet-unexplored issues in the following pages. First, I briefly discuss relevant theoretical gaps in the extant discourse, identity, and affect/ emotion literatures. I argue that these theoretical gaps are illustrated empirically in recent literature on the dominance of the War on Terror discourse. Second, I draw upon the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan to theorise the relationship between affect, discourse, and emotion. In Lacanian theory, emotions result when extra-discursive affect is translated into recognisable emotional signifiers within discourse. Affect is understood here as amorphous potential that remains outside of discourse, which is difficult to articulate but nevertheless has effects within discourse. Emotion, on the other hand, can be viewed as the 'feeling' that signifiers 'represent' once names are attached to affect, thereby conferring on them discursive reality. I argue below that these distinctions are crucial for understanding how both are related to discourse. For Lacan, discourse and affect are not always coterminous – if they were, this would lead to the conclusion that all discourses become equally appealing sites of investment, which is clearly not the case. This framework is useful in this sense insofar as it does not see discourse and affect as synonymous, but rather sees certain kinds of discourses as more likely sources of affective investment by audiences than others. Discourses that attempt to construct a subject are often driven by an affective dimension of a conjectural 'whole' subject

---

4 Jonathan Mercer, 'Emotional Beliefs', *International Organization*, 64:1 (2010), pp. 1–31.
5 Neta Crawford, 'The Passion of World Politics: Propositions on Emotions and Emotional Relationships', *International Security*, 24:4 (2000), pp. 116–56.
6 Jacques E. C. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
7 Andrew A. G. Ross, 'Coming in from the Cold: Constructivism and Emotions', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:2 (2006), pp. 197–222.
8 Bleiker and Hutchison, 'Fear no more', pp. 128–9.
9 Roxanne Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Jennifer Milliken, 'The Study of Discourse in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:2 (1999), pp. 225–54; Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

that is viewed as absent from it, which in turn evokes identification practices to overcome this absence. Affect is, therefore, an inescapable aspect of constructing a subject. It is this dimension – the continual frustration of constructing a 'whole' subject that is never fully constructed – that sets it apart from other approaches to affect, including recent Deleuzian approaches. Finally, I illustrate the empirical importance of these theoretical arguments through an analysis of the interplay between affect, discourse, and emotion in American responses to the events of 11 September 2001 (9/11). Specifically, I critically re-evaluate recent research on the War on Terror to illustrate that largely because of a focus upon cognitive meanings, these analyses overlook what is arguably one of the most crucial aspects in understanding why the War on Terror discourse *resonated* with American audiences – that is, its affective appeal. I argue that theorising the mutual infusion of affect and discourse helps us to better understand the power of the War on Terror in the first place.

Discourse, identity, and affect/emotion in IR

Since the rise of critically-oriented research in IR in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the significance for how constructions of 'us' depend upon, and are mutually constituted by, 'our' encounters with 'them' has enormously broadened the theoretical scope and concerns of IR as a discipline.[10] Empirical analyses of discursive construction have, for example, centred on how self and other are socially produced in terms of predication, representation, gendering, metaphor, and in social science theorising.[11] While these approaches (and similar ones) have taken the discipline into innovative new realms, analyses of the discursive construction of identity have nevertheless not paid enough attention to some crucial aspects of identity. More specifically, the affective and emotional experiences that discourses evoke in their audiences have, until recently, received far less attention in IR than the linguistic construction of discourses themselves.[12] While the theoretical difficulties in exploring the affective and emotional dimensions of discourse and identity are considerable, IR scholars arguably should not let this prevent them from theorising about such effects. As Bleiker and Hutchison have recently argued, social scientific methods are often ill-suited to help us understand aspects of social and political life that are as tough to grasp as affects and emotions.[13] However, by expanding our theoretical apparatuses to incorporate approaches that are better equipped to analyse these phenomena, the payoff will be greater comprehension of a previously neglected, yet vital realm of politics.

---

[10] See Richard Ashley and R. B. J. Walker, 'Speaking the Language of Exile: Dissidence in International Studies', *International Studies Quarterly*, 34:4 (1990), pp. 259–68; R. B. J. Walker, 'Culture, Discourse, Insecurity', *Alternatives*, 11:4 (1986), pp. 485–504.

[11] See, respectively, Milliken, 'the Study of Discourse'; Doty, *Imperial Encounters*; J. Ann Tickner, *Gender and International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Paul A. Chilton, *Security Metaphors: Cold War Discourse from Containment to Common House* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1996); Ido Oren, *Our Enemies and US: America's Rivalries and the Making of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

[12] Again, I argue below for distinguishing between affect and emotion.

[13] Bleiker and Hutchison, 'Fear no more'.

An approach that helps to capture some of these subtle, but powerful, affective and emotional effects would offer a much more complete understanding of many aspects of contemporary world politics. Such an approach could shed light on aspects of politics that usually receive only a passing remark in the literature, yet are usually vital insights into political events and issues. This, in fact, is a tendency displayed in the extant IR literature on the War on Terror and the 2003 Iraq war.

Many accounts of the politics of the Iraq war have emphasised how the Bush administration's push for war became legitimate by dubbing it as a part of the War on Terror. As Ronald Krebs and Jennifer Lobasz argue, the administration's ability to achieve a dominant interpretation of the 9/11 attacks in terms of a 'War on Terror' provided a crucial background against which the existing image of Saddam Hussein could be grafted, thus making it seem as though Iraq was the next logical step, after Afghanistan, in the War on Terror.[14] Amy Gershkoff and Shana Kushner have shown that the high levels of public support for the war were due to the Bush administration's frequent and explicit linking of Iraq to the War on Terror.[15] Richard Jackson argues that the linking of terrorists with 'outlaw regimes' through the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) trope provided a number of political advantages for mobilising public support.[16] As for the power of the War on Terror to drown out other competing narratives, Ian Lustick observes that it 'is assumed without debate or public questioning that terrorism is a problem of the sort that must be addressed by a "war". The War on Terror has thus achieved the status of a background narrative'.[17] Stuart Croft's exhaustive analysis of how deeply the War on Terror became embedded within American society through news media, television shows, jokes, and highway billboards supports the arguments of many that the War on Terror indeed constituted the dominant understanding of American foreign policy in the years immediately following the 9/11 attacks.[18] In short, these studies of the politics of the War on Terror have typically analysed it as a social and discursive construction that has been deployed in US foreign policy since 9/11.[19] These studies have explored how the Bush administration deployed a binary discourse of identity that portrayed the War on Terror as one of good against evil, civilisation versus barbarism, and freedom against fear. Such linguistic tropes are drawn upon to explain why American audiences accepted the idea of conducting a 'War on Terror' and why they largely favoured the idea of launching a military strike against Iraq at the time.

[14] Ronald R. Krebs and Jennifer K. Lobasz, 'Fixing the Meaning of 9/11: Hegemony, Coercion, and the Road to War in Iraq', *Security Studies*, 16:3 (2007), pp. 409–51.

[15] Amy Gershkoff and Shana Kushner, 'Shaping Public Opinion: The 9/11-Iraq Connection in the Bush Administration's Rhetoric', *Perspectives on Politics*, 3:3 (2005), pp. 525–37.

[16] Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics, and Counter-terrorism* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005).

[17] Ian S. Lustick, *Trapped in the War on Terror* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 17.

[18] Stuart Croft, *Culture, Crisis, and America's War on Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Many other states also accepted the interpretation of post 9/11 world politics in terms of the War on Terror, albeit to varying degrees. See, for example, Peter Katzenstein, 'Same War-Different Views: Germany, Japan, and Counterterrorism', *International Organization*, 57:4 (2003), pp. 731–60, and Wyn Rees, 'European and Asian responses to the US-led "War on Terror"', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 20:2 (2007), pp. 215–31.

[19] See also Rainer Hülsse and Alexander Spencer, 'The Metaphor of Terror: Terrorism Studies and the Constructivist Turn', *Security Dialogue*, 39:6 (2008), pp. 571–92.

Most studies of the social construction of the War on Terror, and the identities constructed by it, thus focus on its various narrative strands. Most of these accounts, however, seem to do just this: bring to our attention the various ways in which the War on Terror is indeed not an objective condition, but rather a social construction in which certain interpretations of the world became dominant, excluding other possible constructions which might not legitimate military intervention. While illuminating, these studies limit themselves by tracing linguistic structures as such, without examining affective factors that are crucial when trying to understand why the War on Terror discourse arguably became dominant. In this sense, the affective state(s) of the American public after 9/11 would seem to be one of the most important factors in offering a deeper understanding of the political efficacy of the War on Terror discourse, but has been largely glossed over, if addressed at all, by these studies. Roxanna Sjöstedt, in analysing the historical sources of the Bush Doctrine in the Truman Doctrine, finds that both doctrines 'clearly reflect the overall political and societal discourses of their times', although she acknowledges that she does not problematise 'exactly how discourses affect the ideas and beliefs of individuals'.[20] More directly, Andrew Flibbert argues that ideas about the role of American hegemony and the efficacy of military force are crucial for understanding 'their effect on the collective understandings held by political actors themselves and through their deployment in political contestation'.[21] He adds that these ideas gained currency over a short period of time and shaped both elite and, to a lesser extent, popular discourse largely because they 'appealed to a wide segment of the American public after September 11', just as a black-and-white vision of the world as one of good and evil 'resonated with many Americans'.[22] For Krebs and Lobasz, the Bush administration's discourse became dominant partly because its 'identification of the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks as evil ... resonated with an American public increasingly drawn, if not always consciously, into the orbit of evangelical discourse'.[23] The dominance of the War on Terror discourse, and the inability of the Left to make oppositional headway, Krebs and Lobasz argue, lay in the fact that it was the right 'identity' story at the right time in terms of offering a ready-made succinct narrative of what had happened, who was to blame, and what should be done.[24]

Largely missing from these studies is a thorough understanding of the *efficacy* of these influential discourses after 9/11. One element these studies have in common is that each of them *implies* that the affective and/or emotional state(s) of American audiences after the 9/11 attacks helped to facilitate the political efficacy of the War on Terror discourse.[25] Religious imagery 'resonated' with people. The Bush

---

[20] Roxanna Sjöstedt, 'The Discursive Origins of a Doctrine: Norms, Identity: and Securitization under Harry S. Truman and George W. Bush', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 3:3 (2007), pp. 233–54.

[21] Andrew Flibbert, 'The Road to Baghdad: Ideas and Intellectuals in Explanations of the Iraq War', *Security Studies*, 15:2 (2006), p. 326.

[22] Flibbert, 'The Road to Baghdad', pp. 336–7.

[23] Krebs and Lobasz, 'Fixing the Meaning of 9/11', p. 428.

[24] Ibid., p. 433.

[25] Hutchison and Bleiker point out that emotions are central components in understanding the responses to terrorist attacks and in understanding the rebuilding of political community after such a trauma. They nevertheless do not pursue the questions posed here on the relationships between discourse, emotions, and affects. See Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, 'Emotions in the War on Terror', in Alex J. Bellamy, Roland Bleiker, Sara E. Davies, and Richard Devetak (eds), *Security and the War on Terror* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 57–70.

Doctrine 'reflected' already-existing discourses within American society. Ideas about the role of military force and American power 'gained currency' and shaped perceptions and policy options. Ideas about American exceptionalism and power 'appealed to' much of the American public. That Americans (and, albeit to a lesser extent, publics abroad) accepted the legitimacy and necessity of a 'War on Terror' does not explain *how* this discourse was appealing, how it gained public traction, or how appeals to national identity were able to evoke a sense of insecurity in a majority of the American public. Arguments which offer a brief nod that these discourses 'resonated', 'gained currency', and 'reflected' already existing identities and 'common sense' downplay the non-linguistic aspects of why the War on Terror, and the subsequent foreign policy issues that were integrated into it (such as invading Iraq), became dominant after 9/11.

It is thus apparent that there is much more to discourse and the *appeal* of these discourses and identities than these studies acknowledge. It is frequently recognised in these studies of the War on Terror that something *beyond* merely discursive and symbolic meaning is at work. Yet, these recognitions are usually noted briefly without any substantive elaboration or analysis. The focus of most, if not all, of these studies is upon the symbolic strength of these discourses, not upon the mutual infusion of discourse and affect that would seem to offer a much deeper understanding of their 'currency' or 'resonance' with audiences. Extant work on discourse and identity contends that it is the symbolic influence of words themselves that forecloses the possibility of other meaningful discourses or identities from becoming 'common sense'. Yet, scholars in other disciplines have recognised the limits of such approaches. Humanities scholar Marshall Alcorn, for example, argues that although current forms of discourse analysis have made strides in the study of language, they have also 'oversimplified our understanding of signification'.[26] Political theorist Yannis Stavrakakis notes that many discourse approaches have 'often employed models of subjectivity reducing it to a mere linguistic structure', instead of investigating the affective and emotional forces that are bound up with linguistic structures.[27]

These empirical gaps in the recent War on Terror literature point to, and are symptomatic of, larger shortcomings in IR theoretical literatures on discourse, identity, and affect/emotion. Dimensions of social construction such as affect, desire, and emotion should not be viewed as somehow separate from social constructions, but instead as integral to their appeal. Consequently, affects and desires should not be viewed as mere supplements to current forms of constructivist and discourse analyses. Rather, I argue that these factors are crucial to understanding the power of social constructions and identities in the first place. As Lacanian theorist Mark Bracher contends, when 'a cultural phenomenon succeeds in interpellating subjects – that is, summoning them to assume a certain subjective (dis)position – it does so by evoking some form of desire or by promising satisfaction of some desire'.[28] Theorising discourse and affect as *mutually infusing*

---

[26] Marshall W. Alcorn Jr., *Changing the Subject in English Class: Discourse and the Constructions of Desire.* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), pp. 106–7.

[27] Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 166.

[28] Mark Bracher, *Lacan, Discourse, and Social Change: A Psychoanalytic Cultural Criticism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 19.

seems to be a crucial next step in more comprehensively understanding the social construction of world politics and foreign policy. Yet, the IR affects and emotions literature, as this point, seems to offer little in the way of systematic theorising on the relationship between affect, emotion, and discourse. While much of this literature seems to be guided by broadly constructivist assumptions, little attention has been paid to how affects and discourses *infuse* each other. Andrew Ross's consideration of post-structuralism's attention to the 'inarticulable' aspects of identity is instructive here. Ross asserts, for example, that David Campbell's 'deconstructionist analysis reveals the need for a more direct investigation of affectivity as part of the non-representational or "mystical" dimension of language'.[29] Yet Ross leaves open what exactly is meant by this. In observing that 'non-representational' aspects of language likely somehow relate to emotions and/or affects, Ross points to, without directly pursuing, a concern that is central to the relationship between discourse and affects/emotions.

If we accept that there must be some affective component to the political efficacy of discourses, this component must likely be a major factor in discerning how some discourses dominate while others do not. This, in turn, points to a number of possible ways that the relationship between discourse and affect/emotion can be conceptualised. Observing that some discourses resonate with audiences more than others, and assuming that there must be an affective component underpinning this resonance, affects would seem to be elements which are bound up with discourse, yet distinct from discourse. If affects were conceptualised as coextensive with discourse, then this would lead to the conclusion that every discourse is equally infused with affect. This is clearly not the case. To differentiate between more and less resonant discourses, affect and discourse must be theorised as overlapping, yet not coterminous, phenomena. If they are viewed as partly but not always overlapping, then it becomes possible to theoretically differentiate between those discourses that become sites of affective investment for audiences (and thus become more dominant) than those which do not become sites of investment.

This, in fact, has been an issue at stake in recent discussions within political theory. Specifically, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek have both advocated the necessity to explore the relationship between discourse and affect. In his recent work, Laclau argues for the need to move beyond the analysis of strictly discourse, and investigate its affective dimensions. For him, extant methods of discourse analysis can reconstruct the discursive 'forms' which structure subjectivity, but they cannot fully grasp the affective 'force' which can explain subjects' investments in these structures and their potential durability.[30] Rather than merely examining discursive structures, Laclau acknowledges that the next step in discourse analysis should be the pursuit of how affective investments in discourses and identities further endow these social phenomena with the appeal that they have. Similarly, Žižek has argued that there are multiple dimensions to discourse analysis. One step does involve the analytical deconstruction and reconstruction of a discourse, making explicit the various ways in which identities and signifiers are stitched

---

[29] Ross, 'Coming in from the Cold', p. 211.
[30] Ernesto Laclau, 'Glimpsing the future', in Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart (eds), *Laclau: a critical reader*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 326.

together to produce a meaningful text. Another step, however, involves articulating the ways in which a discourse 'implies, manipulates, [and] produces' affective effects, and consequently contributes to the production of subjects.[31] Žižek draws upon the Lacanian concept of 'enjoyment' here, which as he explains is an affective dimension 'beyond the field of meaning but at the same time internal to it'.[32]

Žižek's reliance upon the concept of enjoyment points to the usefulness of Lacanian theory on this issue. With this in mind, the following section discusses a Lacanian approach to discourse, affect, and emotion. This framework offers a novel theory of the *relationship between* affect and discourse, and thus suggests how to account for the kinds of gaps in current IR empirical and theoretical work discussed above. Lacan offers a theory of the subject which argues for the inextricability of its affective and discursive dimensions, a theory of the subject which the IR affect/emotion literature currently lacks.[33] Indeed, this approach does not view discourse and affect as separate dimensions at all, but instead conceptualises them as mutually-infusing phenomena.

Discourse and affect in Lacanian theory

Unlike many discourse approaches which argue that the entirety of human social reality is discursive, that 'there is nothing outside of discourse',[34] Lacan argues that crucial aspects of being a subject cannot be represented in discourse. For him, being a subject involves a kind of unmediated affective experience that is diminished once the body is socialised into language. This affect is lost once one speaks, since language itself is then introduced as the medium through which one experiences social reality, rather than direct experience through the body.[35] Put a bit more dramatically, 'the symbolic order kills the living being or organism in us, rewriting it or overwriting it with signifiers, such that being dies ... and only the signifier lives on'.[36] Language introduces a fundamental *lack* of 'real' being, a lost sense of completeness or wholeness, which is impossible to recover within discourse, since it is discourse itself that introduces the lack. The subject *qua* speaking subject is, therefore, caught in a bind; it must assume a position within the Symbolic order (the realm of discourse, or culture), but to do so requires a loss that is experienced as affect. Lacan calls this form of affect *jouissance*, or as it is often translated, *enjoyment*. It is 'a pre-symbolic, real enjoyment which is always posited as something lost, as a lost fullness, the part of ourselves that is sacrificed when we enter the symbolic system of language and social relations'.[37] While enjoyment entails a sense of (conjectural or fantasised) wholeness of the 'self', it

---

[31] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), p. 125.

[32] Žižek, *Sublime Object*, p. 125.

[33] Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

[34] David Campbell, *Writing Security: US Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 4.

[35] Lacan, *Ecrits*, pp. 671–702.

[36] Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 101.

[37] Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 42.

also involves a corresponding sense of frustration of the 'self'. While subjects are continually oriented in their identification practices towards the promise of 'full' enjoyment (the conjectural affective experience of being a whole 'self') it is never truly attained. There is always a frustration (or, lack of being) in relation to wholeness precisely because it is never reached. We search in vain for a foundation that does not exist – it never existed and cannot be made to exist – yet it is this desire that propels our continual identification practices.[38]

For example, one can imagine a subject identifying him/herself as 'patriotic'. S/he would identify with the signifier 'patriotic', but since there is no foundational or uncontested notion in society of what 'patriotic' ultimately 'means', the subject would feel a sense of both satisfaction and frustration. S/he would feel satisfaction in taking on the signifier 'patriotic' as identifying him/herself, since it is a signifier which is typically highly valued by society. Yet, the subject would also feel a sense of frustration in never *fully* being able to identify with all that 'patriotism' is often felt to entail. 'Patriotic', then, involves a prospect of being a 'whole' subject, insofar as identifying oneself as so often holds out the promise of an affective experience where one would fully identify with one's nation. Yet, it also involves an ever-persistent sense of lack, that 'being patriotic' never alleviates the sense that one is missing something that is a vital part of one's subjectivity, simply because discourses of patriotism can never deliver the 'full' affective experience sought by the subject.

In a Lacanian perspective, enjoyment manifests itself in all areas of social and political life. Žižek offers numerous examples of this unrepresentable, and always frustrated, form of affect. When a believer describes his profound religious experience to a sceptic and cries, '"You don't really understand it at all! There's more to it, something words cannot express!"' a kind of ineffable enjoyment is at work.[39] The enjoyment he finds in his experience is something that he cannot put into words, yet it is the very thing that organises his existence as a subject of a specific discourse (in this case, religious discourse). A more explicitly political example is Žižek's analysis of nationalism. For him, national identity is not reducible to a laundry list of cultural characteristics that define precisely what it means to be a member of a group. An individual's discursive identification with characteristics of culture is a necessary element of nationalism, but this overlooks how enjoyment is *organised through* the discursive networks of culture. Who 'we' are is indeed constituted through our language, religion, rituals, and so forth, yet it is always felt that there is always *something else*, beyond the cataloguing of such

---

[38] One may reasonably ask whether *jouissance*/enjoyment is another way of talking about human nature, or something akin to it. If enjoyment is an extra-discursive affect that helps to propel identification practices, it may seem like a kind of essence or foundation upon which identification is based, or determined. Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis offer both an acknowledgement of this concern and a reasonable rebuttal. 'For in talking about jouissance one is always walking on the threshold of essentialism . . . However, one should not forget that, even if thinking about the real qua jouissance seems to flirt with a certain essentialism, it nevertheless remains 'essentially' unrepresentable and always in a state of irresolvable tension with the socio-discursive field.' In other words, enjoyment as affect is not a determinate that pushes the subject in any specifiable or predictable direction. See Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis, 'Encounters of the Real Kind: Sussing out the limits of Laclau's embrace of Lacan', in Critchley and Marchart *Laclau: a critical reader*, pp. 201–16.

[39] Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), p. 50.

characteristics, that *really* makes us identify with a group.[40] When asked, for instance, how we 'know' this Thing, the usual answer is that it is simply our 'way of life', which itself does not directly signify 'it', but is as close as one can get with discourse.[41] Enjoyment, then, is the unnameable 'excess' that permeates the numerous rituals that performatively reproduce the nation. That no national ritual alone satisfies or fulfils the desire promised (in terms of achieving a 'harmonious' society, national unity, etc.) ensures that desire for a whole 'self' is displaced to other aspects of identification. Enjoyment is the affective experience which always escapes our attempts to put it into words, yet it is the moving element that binds people to their identifications beyond purely linguistic effects.[42]

This affective dimension, which is distinct from discourse yet is always shaped by and circuited through discourse, has been largely overlooked in the discourse and identity literature in IR. For example, rather than examining the mere social constructedness of the 'War on Terror' to explain its durability, scholars should theorise about the aspects of this discourse that offer audiences points of identification underpinned by enjoyment. For example, the centrality of the signifier 'freedom' in the War on Terror is not due solely to the ambiguity of its linguistic meaning. Rather, it functions as an organising signifier precisely because it is an ultimately irrational final 'sticking point' of the War on Terror discourse.[43] When interrogated to the point of circularity, 'freedom' – as a ground for (simultaneously) defining 'us' against 'them', describing 'our values', 'our way of life', for discourses of terrorism, or a political ideology – is revealed as tautological. 'Freedom' functions as the final referent from which contemporary discourses of terrorism draw their meaning, and eventually becomes its own ground. It is through such signifiers that subjects become affectively tied to discourses: 'the last support of the ideological effect (of the way an ideological network of signifiers "holds" us) is the' affective attachment to these powerful signifiers and identities.[44] 'Freedom' is often discursively deployed in attempts to construct a national subject – a national 'self' – and is typically seen to embody the 'fullness' of who 'we' are, yet there are always frustrations in pursuing 'freedom'. 'Freedom' functions as a discursive anchor, and as a ubiquitous organising signifier of American political discourses, not merely because of its symbolic or linguistic meaning, but rather because subjects become affectively invested in it.

It is this extra-discursive aspect of human social life that a Lacanian framework not only acknowledges, but puts at the very centre of theorising. If constructivists and post-structuralists are to make headway towards deeper understandings of the appeal of discourse and identity, theorising must systematically account for these

---

[40] The examples here of patriotism and religion, and the arguments below, are certainly not meant to exhaust the entire myriad of ways in which affects influence human social reality. There may be, for example, affects which are largely independent of discourse, such as those experiences which could be understood as akin to 'instinct'. Instead, my concern here is with the *political* relevance of affects and their relations to political discourse. On a related note, Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) discusses the political implications of experiences such as appetite and spirit.

[41] Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 201.

[42] It is, for example, the Lacanian answer to Sara Ahmed's question of why identities 'stick'. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004).

[43] Jodi Dean, *Žižek's Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), p. 10.

[44] Žižek, *Sublime Object*, p. 124.

factors and elaborate their relationship with those aspects of identity that IR scholars have already proved adept at analysing, namely, the linguistic elements of identity. As I argue, Lacanian theory offers a useful way to think about how that which is non-representable in discourse nevertheless has effects within discourse.

Affect, emotion, discourse

With the above groundwork laid, some conceptual distinctions can now be made between conventional understandings of emotions and Lacanian concepts of affect. Although Lacan has been criticised for neglecting the affective realm in favour of a focus on language and signification,[45] he in fact offers a nuanced understanding of the complex relation between affect and signification. Indeed, for him, being a subject is *always* an affective experience that pulsates between lack and the pursuit of wholeness through continual identifications. Identification is a 'drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation'.[46] In pursuing a whole sense of 'self', the subject continually experiences both frustration and satisfaction – satisfaction in identifying itself with those valued signifiers of a culture that confer a sense of being and security (such as 'patriotic', 'freedom', 'justice', 'democracy', etc.) and frustration in never being able to *fully* identify with the promise of wholeness and stability that such privileged signifiers seem to offer.

One distinction to make here is between emotions and affects, which can help us to theoretically untangle what is at stake in identification practices. The terms 'emotions' and 'affects' are frequently used in overlapping ways. Ross, for instance, distinguishes between 'cognitive "feelings" and corporeally mediated "emotions" or "affects"', in which feelings are those effects which are 'fully available to consciousness'.[47] This, initially, is a useful distinction. Not only have few IR scholars investigated the differences between conscious and non-conscious (or unconscious) dimensions of emotions, but in doing so Ross opens the conceptual door to a decentred approach to the study of emotions. Once emotions are viewed not merely as individualistic, subjective, or conscious motivations, then the analytical focus is able to shift to the broader cultural currents upon which collective emotions are carried. Drawing upon Brian Massumi (who in turn draws upon the work of Gilles Deleuze), Ross's brief discussion of circulations of affect' points in this direction.[48] He argues, for instance, that a 'collective identity is sustained by habits and memories shared by members of a group, but for each member these affects coexist with other affective circulations that connect him or her to additional constituencies'.[49]

A slightly different approach is taken in much of the Lacanian literature, which more fully specifies the relation between affect and representation. Just as Lacan rejects the notion of an autonomous ego,[50] he also rejects the long tradition that

---

[45] See Andre Green, *The Fabric of Affect in Psychoanalytic Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
[46] Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 78.
[47] Ross, 'Coming in from the Cold', p. 216.
[48] Ibid., p. 199.
[49] Ibid., p. 214.
[50] Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 705.

separates rationality from emotion, or passion.[51] Lacan sees affects as inextricably interwoven with signification, yet still in a sense exterior to signification. Lacanian analyst Bruce Fink has elaborated upon this ultimately false distinction in a clinical setting.

What, in effect, is affect, and how is it supposed to be distinguished from the intellectual? Affect is essentially amorphous – an amorphous quantity or substance, we might say metaphorically. It is common to hear patients say that it was only on Monday that they realized they had spent the entire weekend in some sort of depressed state, indicating thereby that the signifier 'depressed' was only added to the state or attached to it three days into it. The state itself, if we can even speak in such a way, is often indefinable, indeterminate, and it does not come with a preset label. The attachment to it of a ready-made label like 'depression' may have little effect at all on the state, especially when it is provided by someone else, whether a well-meaning friend or a mental health professional. It is, in fact, a sign of improvement when the patients themselves are able to put some kind of label on it and to say 'I was in a bit of a funk over the weekend and I think it was because of *x, y,* or *z*.' In this latter case, the process of symbolization has already begun.[52]

Fink's observations make clear that affects are basically unrepresentable, 'amorphous' in the sense that they cannot be immediately captured by our systems of meaning within discourse. Indeed, the subject's weekend 'funk' was, at the time, not strictly meaningful in a way that s/he could discursively articulate. One may even say it was close to a mood. The affect only came to have meaning once a name was attached to it within discourse. Naming retroactively signifies – attaches signification to – the condition that was felt, but as Fink implies, this name is likely not a description that entirely captures the condition that was experienced. Had the affect been something readily identifiable, the subject would have presumably been able to attach a label to it before having lived with it for three days and afterwards ascertaining that the label 'depressed' best describes it. And, it was only after the 'indeterminate' feeling was brought into a discursive frame through the signifier 'depressed' that the subject could work through it, that is, make sense of it. The subject could only speak about the affect once s/he could inscribe it, however imperfectly, into a discourse.

This illustrates the relationship that Lacanian theory sees between affect, emotion, and discourse. As Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis explain,

For example, we can grasp a basic Lacanian insight by drawing a distinction between affect and emotion. If affect represents the quantum of libidinal energy, we could say that emotion results from the way it gets caught up in a network of signifiers . . . It is because of this, according to Lacan, that emotions such as depression or anger can deceive: their meaning and significance is a function not of their intrinsic properties, but rather of the subject's universe of meaning and the way that [discourse] structures this. It is for this reason that Lacan cautions against the lures of emotions, paying special attention to the 'letter' of what is said and the displacements of affect.[53]

If affects, then, are 'amorphous' and 'indeterminate' states of mood that remain outside of discourse, which are difficult to articulate but nevertheless have effects

---

[51] For a recent critical view of this tradition, see Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' error: emotion, reason, and the human brain* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1994).

[52] Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Ecrits Closely* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 51.

[53] Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis, 'Lacan and Politial Subjectivity: Fantasy and Enjoyment in Psychoanalysis and Political Theory', *Subjectivity*, 24:1 (2008), p. 267.

within discourse, then emotions can be viewed as the 'feelings' that signifiers 'represent' once we attach them to affects, thereby conferring on them discursive reality. This is, in some ways, similar to how others in IR have understood emotion (as distinct from affect as described here). For example, Neta Crawford defines emotions as 'subjective experiences that also have physiological, intersubjective, and cultural components'.[54] Yet, although they are 'internally experienced', emotions become meaningful when 'cognitively and culturally construed and constructed', or, put differently, when meaningful signifiers are attached to them.[55] Ross also explores much of the interdisciplinary literature which conceptualises emotion as conscious states and as readily representable in discourse.[56] The idea of emotion as somewhat closer (than affect) to conscious cognition is also related to recent work on emotions and beliefs. For Mercer, an emotional belief is 'one where emotion constitutes and strengthens a belief and which makes possible a generalization about an actor that involves certainty beyond evidence', in other words, 'beliefs are where cognition and emotion meet'.[57] Similarly, Widmaier argues that emotional influences 'prefigure both cognitively oriented paradigmatic debates and interpretations of material incentives' during economic crises.[58] Yet, what many of these treatments have neglected is precisely what the approach here emphasises. That is, affect is an intrinsic aspect of constructing a subject. By conceptualising the very construction of subjectivity as an affect-infused dynamic of identification and frustration, this approach offers a more comprehensive model of the subject than most of the current IR emotions literature.

The Lacanian distinction between affect and emotion is a valuable way to think about this issue since it allows us to draw a conceptual distinction between affect and discourse, rather than seeing them as coterminous. This, in turn, is crucial for theoretically distinguishing between discourses which do, and do not, become sites of affective investments for audiences. To neglect these relationships may lead to the conclusion that all discourses or signifiers are equally appealing sites of affective investment, which is clearly not the case,[59] as illustrated by the dominance of the War on Terror discourse. As Croft points out, there were a number of alternative discourses constructed following 9/11 in which audiences did not become affectively invested, hence these discourses were marginalised in the public arena. Various commentators at the time, for example, argued that 9/11 and responses to it should be conceived not as a 'War on Terror', but as an attack by Saudi Arabian radicals, as a result of a threat posed by internal American Muslims who could not be assimilated into American culture, as a criminal act, or as a crime against humanity.[60]

[54] Crawford, 'the Passion of World Politics', p. 125.
[55] Ibid., p. 125.
[56] Ross, 'Coming in from the Cold'.
[57] Mercer, 'Emotional Beliefs', p. 2.
[58] Wesley W. Widmaier, 'Emotions Before Paradigms: Elite Anxiety and Populist Resentment From the Asian to Subprime Crises', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39:1 (2010), p. 131. For other recent work on emotion in IR see Oded Löwenheim and Gadi Heiman, 'Revenge in International Politics', *Security Studies*, 17:4 (2008), pp. 685–724; Robert E. Harkavy, 'Defeat, National Humiliation, and the Revenge Motif', *International Politics*, 37 (2000), pp. 345–68; Khaled Fattah and K. M. Fierke, 'A Clash of Emotions: The Politics of Humiliation and Political Violence in the Middle East', *European Journal of International Relations*, 15:1 (2009), pp. 67–93.
[59] Stavrakakis, *Lacanian Left*, pp. 99–100.
[60] Croft, *Culture, Crisis*, pp. 113–15.

There is a helpful analogy for thinking about the relationship between discourse and affect which escapes it. If we accept that affects (rather than discursively signified emotions) are most often inexpressible, the bonds between them must be conceptualised in a manner that does not view them as coextensive, yet allows for their overlap. In the spaces where the two do overlap, discourse and affect are not two separate entities that come together, but rather mutually infuse to the extent that discourse *is* affective such that subjects become invested in it. Discourses, in a sense, *transform* affect into emotional expression, and critical approaches to textual translation offer an analogy to illustrate this process. Traditional approaches to translation assume the presence of an 'original' text that is unified, coherent, and consistent, where the task of the translator is to faithfully and accurately reproduce the text into another language.[61] Critical approaches, however, substantially complicate this task. As Walter Benjamin, in a classic essay on translation, contends, for 'in [the text's] continuing life, which could not be so called if it were not the transformation and renewal of a living thing, the original is changed'.[62] In other words, the very act of translating changes that which was presumed to be the 'original' into something other than it 'was'. Other approaches push this logic further. Deconstructionist approaches, for instance, deny the presumption of either a foundational 'original' text or the notion of an 'accurate' translation. Deconstruction, in this sense, questions the very notion of faithfully representing or reproducing an 'original'. Instead, translation is viewed as constantly modifying, shaping, deferring, and displacing the meaning of the 'original'.[63] Just as we cannot know the 'original meaning' of a text which has been irrevocably modified, whose meaning has been displaced and shaped by the very act of translation, we cannot access affects directly, and can only have knowledge of them within the discourses we deploy to describe and name them. We may presume that an original text 'had' an 'original' message or meaning, but we can only work with the modified text that the translation has produced.

The relationship between enjoyment as affect and signification is (somewhat) similar. Though exterior to discourse, affect nevertheless has effects within discourse, and affect can only become meaningful when *translated into discourse* as emotionally-charged signifiers. Discourse shapes affect, translating it through signifiers with which we typically name emotions. Yet, like the translation which modifies the original text and shapes it in new ways, discourse shapes our access to the forces of affect. It is the introduction of the subject into language, where the imagined wholeness of enjoyment is presumed to have been lost, that the subject must resort to language to try and 'recapture' the whole 'self' it believes has been lost. Language translates affect, and in doing so also shapes what 'little bits of *jouissance*' the subject can experience through identification practices with such anchoring signifiers as 'patriotic', 'freedom' and so on.[64] Discourses that promise an encounter with what the subject believes is missing, for example, a harmonious life with no problems, a pure Nation without antagonisms, etc., offer the promise

[61] Edwin Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation Theories*, rev. 2nd ed. (Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2001), pp. 47, 75.
[62] Walter Benjamin, 'The Translator's Task', trans. Steven Rendall, *TTR: traduction, terminologie, redaction*, 10:2 (1997), p. 155.
[63] Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation*, p. 161.
[64] Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Paradigms of Jouissance', *Lacanian Ink*, 17 (2000), p. 37.

of filling the subject's lack, yet without ever fully doing so. When an individual subject, for instance, identifies with a discourse that promises 'the Solution' to one's life which offers the reclaiming of that which the subject feels is missing from its subjectivity, s/he will feel both a kind of satisfaction and frustration in identifying and *not being able to fully* identify with 'it'. In discourses constructing a collective subject, a conjectural object of 'national purity' is often held out as the solution to the nation's troubles. Such discourses may appeal to audiences insofar as they hold out the promise of an affective attachment to a conflict- or antagonism-free nation. Yet, the kinds of 'obstacles' to national enjoyment offered, often constructed as the presence of minorities, will correspondingly evoke frustration with these discourses in not delivering the affective experience promised.

Thus, while discourse translates affect, there are variations of enjoyment as affect which the subject can experience. A subject, for another example, can experience a kind of satisfaction and security as a subject of 'freedom'. Yet, a kind of frustration is simultaneously felt in not achieving the wholeness that the valued signifier 'freedom' often seems to promise. The 'little bits of *jouissance*' that the subject can experience indeed point towards affective variations in the subject's pulsations between wholeness and lack.[65] Enjoyment in this regard has connotations both of pleasure and pain, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, security and insecurity, and the subject's identification processes are constantly balancing between these senses. Satisfaction and frustration are both dimensions of the partial enjoyment that subjects can experience and the conjectural 'full' enjoyment that the subject always anticipates yet never attains.

This approach to affective pulsations of wholeness and lack has some affinity to other current approaches to affect. In some ways complementary to this conceptualisation are Deleuzian-inspired frameworks, which often approach affect in ways that register the different modalities that affect may take. Massumi, for example, discusses affect in terms of 'vitality' and 'intensity', and how such qualities often escape confinement within individual bodies only to be 'captured' as emotion later.[66] Similarly and more specifically, Connolly has explored the politics of the American right by conceptualising affect in terms of 'patterns of rhythm, resonance, dissonance, and reverberation' which 'not only play a role within cultural life, but ... also forge sub-discursive modes of communication between us and other parts of nature'.[67] As part of a subject's pulsations between conjectural wholeness and lack, then, such variations (or rhythms) can be expressed or felt as

---

[65] Miller, 'Paradigms of Jouissance', p. 37.

[66] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 35–6.

[67] William Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 66. For discussions between Lacanian and Deleuzian approaches to subjectivity and democracy, see Lars Tønder and Lasse Thomassen (eds), *Radical Democracy: Politics between abundance and lack* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005). Many disciplines discuss affect and emotions in a variety of ways, including neuroscience: Damasio, *Descartes' error*, geography: Deborah Thien, 'After or Before Feeling? A consideration of affect and emotion in geography', *Area*, 37:4 (2005), pp. 450–6, anthropology: Analiese Richard and Daromir Rudnyckyj, 'Economies of affect', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15 (2009), pp. 57–77, and cultural studies: Stuart Hall, *Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London and New York: Verso, 1988); Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of this Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (Routledge, 1992); Jennifer Harding and E. Deidre Pribram, 'The power of feeling: Locating emotions in culture', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 5:4 (2002), pp. 407–25, to name a few.

different modalities of intensity, dissonance between the promise of full subjectivity perhaps offered by a discourse and the frustration over the lack that remains, or other affective forms which may have different kinds of effects in different political contexts. Moreover, it is precisely this aspect which both distinguishes a Lacanian approach from Deleuzian approaches, and which perhaps lends it a theoretical advantage in examining the politics of affect. Lacanian theory conceptualises affect and desire as inescapable dimensions of constructing a subject. Constructing a (collective or national) subject, in turn, is often what is most at stake in political discourses. Politics is often articulated (at least implicitly) in terms of unfulfilled demands or desires – or more specifically, in terms of subjects ('the Nation', 'us', 'we', etc.) that are constructed as lacking. In this sense, political contestation is often about frustrations of desire. In contrast, in Deleuzian approaches argue that identity 'is formed in the context of overwhelming abundance and multiplicity, potential, and pluralism. Any particular identity emerges as a given crystallization out of the unending flow of possibilities'.[68] Thus, while Deleuzian perspectives may be useful for analysing generalised flows or circulations of desire and affect, Lacanian theory more effectively analyses the frustrations and blockages of affect – precisely the way in which collective political subjects are often constructing as lacking.[69]

With these factors in mind, a Lacanian framework places less emphasis on specific emotions than on how discourses translate and shape affects that are expressed in emotions. In other words, instead of examining the role of defined emotions and specific emotional representations, this approach to discourse analysis combines a theoretical understanding of affect as enjoyment with the need to account for the *lack* orienting the construction of the subject within discourse. Rather than studying, for instance, how specific emotions play out in particular political contexts, the theoretical ideas offered here offer a way to think about how discourses translate affects which *lead to* the discursive representations of specific emotions. Discourses that attempt to construct a subject (especially political discourses) are often driven by an affective dimension of conjectural wholeness that is constructed as absent from it.

The following section empirically illustrates the import of these ideas. Through a critical re-evaluation of recent research on the War on Terror that focuses largely on linguistic responses to the events of 9/11, I show the empirical importance of distinguishing between affect and emotion, and how official discourses following 11 September 2001 *translated affect into recognisable emotions*. This, in turn, illustrates the usefulness in specifying and analysing the relationship between affect, emotion, and discourse.

Affective responses to 11 September 2001

Several recent studies of 9/11 and the War on Terror illustrate the multiplicity of emotional responses to the events. Studies on humiliation and shame,[70] taken

---

[68] Leonard Williams, 'Abundance, lack, and identity', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 12:2 (2007), p. 115.
[69] Alcorn, *Changing the Subject*, p. 66.
[70] Saurette, 'You dissin me?'; Danchev, 'Like a Dog'.

together, illustrate that this very multiplicity should be recognised and explored even further. However, there has been much less work on the more ambiguous affective potentials (we may even say pre-emotional) from which these specific emotional responses were shaped. The approach explicated above offers a way to take a theoretical step back from examining representations of specific emotional responses, and to instead theorise about these 'indefinable' and 'indeterminate' affects and how they are translated by official and cultural discourses into emotional signifiers.[71]

In fact, recent studies examining the 'void of meaning' surrounding 9/11 do, without necessarily realising it, point to the inexpressible affective experiences which are different from emotional responses. Jack Holland[72] and Dirk Nabers[73] analyse how the events of 9/11 were constructed as a 'crisis' whose meaning was filled in by discourses constructing American national identity in particular ways. For Nabers, 'international crises are crucial in processes of change, as they are characterized by a void of meaning – that might be deliberately constructed – a structural gap that has to be filled, a situation of fragmentation and indeterminacy of articulations'.[74] Nabers argues that the conceptual link between the 'voids of meaning' that are opened by crises and the identities that are subsequently constructed lies in the social acts of agents that attempt to fix and stabilise meanings. Since meaning structures are both ruptured and changed by crises, the creation and transmission of *meaning* through discourse is the driving factor behind political change.[75] Holland takes a somewhat similar approach. The 'void was an organic *cultural* condition that logically followed from events which existing discourses failed to regulate'.[76] 'Language', in this sense, 'failed to adequately or consistently regulate the *meaning* of the unfolding events'.[77] The events of 9/11 were not 'naturally' a crisis, but were instead politically and culturally (re)produced as a 'crisis'.[78]

Together Nabers and Holland offer a partial link between, on the one hand, what extant constructivist and discourse analyses tell us about the social construction of the War on Terror and, on the other hand, what the approach explicated above identifies. Their analyses of the 'void' of 9/11 are useful for more fully understanding the constructions and responses to the 'crisis', yet they largely neglect to conceptualise how the 'void' evoked *affective experiences* in relation to disrupted *social meanings*. In other words, they do not theorise the social effects of the 'void' as comprehensively as their analyses of social meanings seem to suggest. To his credit, Holland, drawing upon Gearóid Ó Tuathail who in turn draws upon Connolly's work on neuroscience, briefly discusses this dimension by arguing that the signifier '9/11' has become a somatic marker. A somatic marker, Connolly

---

[71] Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, p. 51.

[72] Holland, 'From September 11th, 2001 to 9/11'.

[73] Dirk Nabers, 'Filling the Void of Meaning: Identity Construction in US Foreign Policy After September 11, 2001', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 5:2 (2009), pp. 191–214.

[74] Ibid., p. 193.

[75] Ibid., p. 193, emphasis added.

[76] Holland, 'From September 11th, 2001 to 9/11', p. 276, emphasis added.

[77] Ibid., pp. 275–6, emphasis added.

[78] Ibid., p. 276; see also Wesley W. Widmaier, 'Constructing Foreign Policy Crises: Interpretive Leadership in the Cold War and the War on Terrorism', *International Studies Quarterly*, 51:4 (2007), pp. 779–94.

explains, is 'a culturally mobilized, corporeal disposition through which affect-imbued, preliminary orientations to perceptions and judgment scale down the material factored into cost-benefit analyses, principled judgments, and reflective experiments'.[79] A mixture of the 'corporeal' and the 'cultural', the somatic marker concept is in some ways parallel to the discussion above of the relationship between affect and discourse. Much like Holland argues that some of the discourses constructing '9/11' as 'inexplicable' and as a 'crises' were drawn from US security culture,[80] I argue that some of these discursive responses were shaped by affective potentials which gave rise to emotional signifiers. '9/11', Holland argues, serves as a linguistic and affective symbol that condensed an entire set of collective meanings and feelings once its content had been fixed by the War on Terror discourse. While useful in understanding why '9/11' itself became emotionally charged, this approach says little about the distinctions between affect and emotion, or how they are systematically related to discourse and the construction of a subject. However, some of these analyses do illustrate the kind of progressive articulation that occurred after 9/11 through which 'indeterminate' affects were articulated into emotional responses.[81] In particular, Holland's analysis of individual interviews conducted after 11 September 2001 captures an important aspect of this process.

Holland analyses individual interviews conducted in the days and weeks after 11 September 2001. While many commentators and scholars have discussed how the shock of that day shattered 'commonsense' expectations about security and violence in the US,[82] Holland offers samples of how this shock was expressed by many:

It was unspeakable.[83]

[It] made it difficult to talk ... speaking clearly wasn't really happening at that point, it was very difficult.[84]

[It was] so unbelievable that it didn't want to sink in.[85]

At first I wasn't angry, because I couldn't believe it was happening.[86]

I felt nothing because I couldn't understand.[87]

---

[79] William Connolly, *Neuropolitics: thinking, culture, speed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 35.

[80] Holland, 'From September 11th, 2001 to 9/11', p. 285, also pp. 275–6, 289.

[81] By examining some of the affective politics surrounding 9/11, I do not mean to suggest that affects and emotions matter *only* during times of crisis rather than in everyday life and politics. Although, Bleiker and Hutchison, 'Fear no more', p. 129 suggest that the relevance of emotions is often most *visible* during traumatic events, since these events unsettle and challenge the emotional ties which help to hold together communities.

[82] See David Campbell, 'Time is Broken: The Return of the Past in the Response to September 11', *Theory and Event*, 5:4 (2001), available at: {http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v005/5.4campbell.html} accessed 27 May 2010, and Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[83] Dan Hiller, Witness and Response Collection, US Library of Congress American Folklife Center, 18 September 2001 (SR 381), quoted in Holland, 'From September 11th, 2001 to 9/11', p. 279.

[84] Naree Bisson, Witness and Response Collection, US Library of Congress American Folklife Center, 11 October 2001 (SR144), quoted in ibid.

[85] Karl Day, Witness and Response Collection, US Library of Congress American Folklife Center, 2 October 2001 (SR101), quoted in ibid.

[86] Daniel Dominguez, Witness and Response Collection, US Library of Congress American Folklife Center, 8 October 2001 (SR247), quoted in ibid.

[87] Kyoko Sato, Witness and Response Collection, US Library of Congress American Folklife Center, 16 October 2001 (SR015), quoted in ibid.

The events were sufficiently disrupting that the discursive resources available to most Americans were initially useless in 'making sense' of what had happened. As Holland notes, the 'void that 9/11 created resulted from two primary factors: the shattering of the foundational myths of US security culture and the resulting silence of both the media and political elites'.[88] This silence, however, did not last long. Various discourses began competing to define the 'meaning' of the events in the days and weeks afterwards. This can be seen in audiences' constructions of the events. Public understandings soon began to be (re)produced and articulated through official interpretations. Themes of nationalism and defining the new enemy were frequently expressed.

[It was a] crime against humanity.[89]

[It] was an attack on our society, on our way of life . . . an attack on free life in general.[90]

How can they live among us and not see kindness?[91]

[We should] take care of the situation no matter what the costs may be . . . World War, whatever . . . I'm all for war . . . we need to strike back ten times harder than they struck us . . . by any means necessary.[92]

Let's stick together and show the other countries that we may hurt for a bit, but when we make a comeback, we make a comeback.[93]

Although Nabers and Holland largely frame their analyses in terms of the linguistic construction of *meaning* of 11 September 2001, read through a Lacanian lens, their analyses are useful in demonstrating the articulation and 'naming' of *affects* surrounding the events. What the above statements implicitly show is that the stakes in the discursive politics following 9/11 were not merely competition for the dominance of social meanings, but that the shaping of affects was occurring simultaneously. As the first set of quotes illustrate, it was not simply social meanings that were unsettled, but the affective responses to the events were similarly jarred. 'Unspeakable' and 'unbelievable' seemed to be the only signifiers available to try and symbolise what had happened. Familiar discursive tropes no longer seemed adequate to express what was presumably experienced. With no such resources available to make sense of what had happened, no definable emotional response was yet possible. As one person indicated, 'At first I wasn't angry, because I couldn't believe it was happening'. Conventional emotional signifiers were not up to the task of giving contour to the experience. Only *after* the spread of official and other cultural discourses did emotional responses begin to take shape. These discourses were reproduced through people's own understandings of what the events were in terms of their meaning, but these discourses (and discourses of popular culture, in

---

[88] Holland, 'From September 11th, 2001 to 9/11', p. 281.

[89] Adam Gospodarek, Witness and Response Collection, US Library of Congress American Folklife Center, 13 September 2001 (SR375), quoted in ibid., p. 285.

[90] Bill Kyriagis, Witness and Response Collection, US Library of Congress American Folklife Center, 14 September 2001 (SR375), quoted in ibid.

[91] Patti Chapman, Witness and Response Collection, US Library of Congress American Folklife Center, 27 October 2001 (SR025), quoted in ibid.

[92] Aaron Hill, Witness and Response Collection, US Library of Congress American Folklife Center, 18 September 2001 (SR203), quoted in ibid., p. 288.

[93] Debbie Spinner, 11 September 2001 Documentary Project (2001), US Library of Congress American Folklife Center, available at: {http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/afc911:@field(DOC ID+afc2001015t011)}.

Holland's account) also produced social channels through which affects could be articulated into discursive reality.

This progressive articulation was made possible by the discourses that moved to fill the 'void', which *led to* recognisable emotional responses such as revenge ('I'm all for war ... we need to strike back ten times harder than they struck us'), indignation ('[It was a] crime against humanity'), and narcissism ('How can they live among us and not see kindness?'). As Fink explains, 'affect is essentially amorphous', yet, 'affect in isolation gives us access to nothing whatsoever, since we cannot work on affect directly'.[94] The affects presumably experienced after 9/11 were not necessarily definable, but are perhaps better understood as initially amorphous potential. They were affective potentials that escaped efforts to articulate them into everyday categories of emotional recognition, and thus remained *outside* the discourses of American political culture. It was only after prominent official political, cultural, and popular culture discourses[95] began to reorient the search for national enjoyment (qua *jouissance*) around the idea of a 'wounded' national subject (which could be made whole if only the new 'War on Terror' was acted out) that it became possible to articulate more definable emotions. Indeed, the desire to (re)construct a national subject was evident – 'let's stick together ... when we make a comeback, we make a comeback'. Ambiguous affective states were soon articulated into attempts to construct a 'whole' national 'self' ('let's stick together', 'we') which were shaped through the political and cultural discourses at the time. The desire for a 'full' and unambiguous (for example, one that was not 'shattered') national subject with which people could securely affectively invest was evident in the discourses deployed to narrate the events and their aftermath.

A helpful way to understand this shaping of affects into nameable emotions – affect bound to signifiers – is through the translation analogy discussed above on the relationship between discourse and affect. Just as the very act of translation modifies the 'meaning' of the 'original' text, it is only through discursive representations that the presumed force of affect can be understood, even if discourses translate and shape affect into more specific emotional directions that changes the initial experience of them. The progressive articulation illustrated in Holland's analysis demonstrates this translation from affect to emotion. An event which was initially 'unspeakable' was later named as a 'crime'. An event that 'made it difficult to talk' was later constructed as 'an attack on our society, on our way of life'. An event that was at first 'so unbelievable that it didn't want to sink in' soon morphed into the much more specific desire 'to strike back ten times harder than they struck us'. These changes illustrate not simply the articulation of social meanings. More importantly, they signal the bringing into discursive existence affects that were initially inexpressible, and which later came to be named with more conventional emotional signifiers. Just as the act of translation shapes the text, so did discourses of the War on Terror shape and construct a national subject which offered people a way to translate the affective aspects of their identifications into discourses of national identity. As Fink argues, affect 'itself, if we can even

---

[94] Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, p. 51.
[95] See Holland, 'From September 11th, 2001 to 9/11'; the media, of course, played a significant role in this process. See Croft, *Culture, Crisis*; Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*.

speak in such a way, is often indefinable, indeterminate, and it does not come with a preset label'.[96] Affect must be given a label within discourse in order for it to become, in a sense, meaningful. This illustrates the processes which occurred in responses to 9/11. While affect is often inexpressible and indefinable, 'emotion results from the way it gets caught up in a network of signifiers'.[97] The ambiguity of the national subject ('us', 'we', 'America'), of peoples' identifications with that national subject, and the affective pulsations constitutive of them, were, for a time, vividly open on 9/11 as the above statements suggest.

Read through a Lacanian lens, then, these analyses go some way toward illustrating the affective dynamics of some initial responses to 11 September 2001. However, their focus on social meanings, rather than the mutual infusion of affect and discourse, limits their ability to more fully account for the *resonance* of the War on Terror discourse. Nabers, for example, draws upon Laclau's notion of credibility to explain why certain discourses resonate while others do not. As he explains, 'if [a] new political project clashes with the "ensemble of sedimented practices constituting the normative framework of a certain society", it will likely be rejected'.[98] Holland offers a similar explanation: 'Bush achieved considerable resonance in narrating a crisis discourse; he did "a remarkable job of defining the attacks of September 11 to his advantage", framing a crisis discourse that was "a key factor in his success", elevating him from a perceived poor leader to an increasingly popular wartime president'.[99] Nabers and Holland are partially correct in pointing out that discourses must be credible in the sense of not radically diverging from the established 'commonsense' of a society if they are to become part of that 'commonsense'. And, the cultural milieu which Holland argues discursive responses were drawn from is also an important factor. Yet, their arguments exhibit some of the same shortcomings as much of the War on Terror literature discussed earlier – by mainly examining the linguistic content, cultural aspects, and social meanings of post-9/11 discourses, they largely neglect how affects and emotions helped to solidify the 'sedimentation' processes that began shortly afterwards. In one respect, the construction of 9/11 as a 'crisis' was surely aided by the 'relative paucity of alternative crisis narratives', allowing the 'void' to be 'strategically selected in favour of the construction of the crisis' preferred by the Bush administration, as Holland asserts.[100] Yet, it was not *merely* the lack of discursive alternatives that explains the traction that the official discourse gained. Certain discourses were efficacious because people became more affectively invested in some discourses rather than others.

Conclusion

While the recent developments in the study of affect and emotion in world politics are certainly encouraging, this literature has left a crucial issue unexamined. The study of discourse has been an important research programme in IR for some time,

---

[96] Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, p. 51.
[97] Glynos and Stavrakakis, 'Lacan and Politial Subjectivity', p. 267.
[98] Nabers, 'Filling the Void of Meaning', p. 197.
[99] Holland, 'From September 11th, 2001 to 9/11', p. 285.
[100] Ibid.

and the relationships between affect, emotion, and discourse pose new questions for each of these literatures. This article poses some central questions about this relationship, and offers a new lens through which to theoretically and empirically deepen the study of affect, emotion, and discourse. Investigating the affective power of discourse can shed light on why some discourses are more politically efficacious than others. Drawing upon the theories of Jacques Lacan, I argue that affect is intimately bound to being a subject. Conceptualising affect as inexpressible, as that which lies outside of discourse, and emotion as that which is evoked once affect is translated within discourse, I offer an approach that helps to theoretically differentiate between discourses that become sites of affective investment for audiences and those that do not. I offered an empirical illustration of the importance of these arguments by critically re-evaluating recent research on the War on Terror. To more fully account for the resonance of the War on Terror with audiences, I argued that analyses of its social meanings cannot be understood apart from how official discourses translated audiences' affective responses to 11 September 2001. In doing so, the approach explicated here helps to more comprehensively account for how the War on Terror discourse was able to gain social traction.