On Backlash: Emotion and the Politicisation of Security

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Abstract: This article explores the role of emotion in the politicisation of security through the concept of backlash: the idea of visceral and reactionary episodes where security claims are adamantly rejected and the subject of ‘security’ becomes intensely controversial. Starting by examining the role of emotion in politicisation, I make the case for viewing emotions as playing a key role in the distribution of certainty in security discourse. Building on this epistemic view of emotion, I review how backlash is understood in other fields before tailoring a definition for security studies centered around four constitutive features: reaction, hostility, emotion, and contagion. The final section focuses on the politicising effects of backlash including the mobilisation of backlash movements, the intensification of controversy, and arena shifting. The discussion concludes by suggesting that the concept of backlash offers a promising research agenda for those inquiring into the politicisation of security.

Keywords: Backlash, Emotion, Security, Politicisation, Securitisation, Certainty

Introduction

In recent years security studies has become increasingly concerned with the depoliticising effects of popular fears over security issues such as terrorism. Often framed in the “idiom of exception”¹, this argument treats security as an autonomous realm of sovereign authority which sits apart from so-called normal politics. The exclusivity of this realm is guaranteed by a popular fear that subjecting security decisions to political debate can weaken, delay, or obstruct urgent countermeasures. In these situations, debate is construed as dithering, and political opposition is seen as undermining the unity required for decisive action. Dissent becomes stigmatised as critics are labeled as ‘soft on terror’ or failing to ‘support the troops’. Fear is a force for depoliticisation because it narrows the space for controversy and debate, a shift which effectively empties security of its democratic content.

This image of fear’s depoliticising potential is often powerful and persuasive, but it is at best a partial picture. Beyond this narrow preoccupation with fear, security has always been a site of diverse emotional experiences. When the Trump administration

issued a travel ban for Muslim-majority countries it provoked widespread anger and outrage, mobilising protests at airports and fueling a battery of legal challenges. In the Canadian context the Conservative government’s push for enhanced surveillance powers under the pretext of combating child pornography was denounced as an embarrassing failure. In other contexts, claims about the threat of climate change often face incredulity, derision, and even laughter. These diverse responses are poignant reminders that simply conflating security with the politics of fear can risk major oversimplification.

Taking this widened range of emotional experience as an entry point, this essay examines how emotions contribute to the politicisation of security. The discussion focuses on the understudied phenomena of ‘backlash’: situations where security claims provoke hostile emotional reactions. A backlash is not the same thing as a failed securitising move. Security claims can often fail because they are met with apathy – as is the case of esoteric threats such as declining biodiversity or the emergence of artificial intelligence. In other cases, audiences may be sympathetic to a security claim even if they ultimately reject it – as is the case of residents who refuse mandatory evacuations when faced with natural disasters. The concept of backlash denotes something different: it is not a matter of security claims failing to resonate, but a situation where claims resonate in a way that provokes hostility and contention. It signals a visceral and reactionary episode where security claims are adamantly rejected, speakers are rebuked, and the subject of ‘security’ becomes intensely controversial. In sum, backlash represents a distinctive kind of politicisation of security.

At the core of this reading of backlash is an epistemic view of emotion. Stretching back to the work of James and Durkheim, there is a thread of argument which stresses how emotions arising from social interaction create certainty over the symbols and values of social order. From classic moments of collective effervescence in religious life, to more modern secular encounters like talk radio and Twitter feeds, different repertoires of interaction give rise to emotional intensities which suppress ambiguity and make us certain of possibilities for future action. Belief turns to conviction, doubt into deference, and interpretive horizons become narrowed. Emotions have an epistemic role in this sense because they distribute confidence – the subjective experience of certainty – over different claims in security discourse. In episodes of backlash this takes the form of hostile emotions creating certainty that a security claim is suspect and therefore open to contestation. Widespread anger and outrage at the Trump administration’s Muslim travel ban, for example, was more than expressive; it signalled a deeper confidence that the claims behind the ban were glaringly fraudulent. Whether the specific reaction is one of anger, disgust, or simply laughter, backlash emotions render security claims as exceedingly dubious and thus demanding contention and forceful deliberation.

The argument proceeds in four sections. The first section deepens the recent move to study politicisation by outlining an epistemic view of emotion. While emotion can always be a factor in politicisation, episodes of backlash stand out by virtue of their intensity leading to security claims being adamantly and vigorously rejected. The second section lays the foundation for a better understanding of these episodes by reviewing how backlash is understood in other fields. The third section outlines a definition of backlash tailored for security studies and organised around four constitutive features – reaction, hostility, emotion, and contagion. The final section focuses on the politicising effects of backlash. In the conclusion I offer a brief reflection on the significance of backlash politics and a research agenda for the way forward.

Emotion and Politicisation: Coming in From the Cold

For more than two decades the problem of depoliticisation has both fascinated and unnerved security scholars. As the editors of this special issue argue:

"Contemporary security analysis often links security to strategies of depoliticisation. Depoliticisation essentially refers to processes that seek to deny the political character of a topic and move the issue out of the realm of contingent and controversial discussion... Though security has always been political, it is often seen as placing a constraint on democratic politics that closes down public debate and political contestation and limits the range of legitimate arenas, actors and arguments."

The premise is not that security is somehow devoid of politics, but that it is a departure from politics as usual. Executive prerogative and secrecy, expert knowledge, and the increasing role of technology in security governance all function to remove security decisions from the realm of public contestation. Depoliticisation, in this generalised sense, can be understood as a process of democratic closure. It is against this backdrop that the editors call for a novel and intriguing focus on ‘politicisation’. Confronted with evidence of activist parliaments, probing journalists, and media-savvy NGOs all openly contesting security decisions, the depoliticising trends once identified by security research appear challenged or, in some cases, even subject to reversal.

The turn towards studying politicisation then, marks an important resurfacing of the role of controversy and debate in security analysis. At the same time however, the role of emotion in the recent studies of politicisation remains underdeveloped.

For example, much of the literature cites the ‘intensity’ of public debates as an

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6 See also Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde, Security: A New Framework for Analysis (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998), 32.