

Introduction

On Dangers and Their Interpretation

On August 2, 1990, Iraq became a danger to the United States. For many, this was obvious—nothing could be more real and less disputable than an invasion of one country by another. Even though it was not the United States that had been invaded, this deed was regarded as a fact that could be observed and a danger that could be understood. Yet, without denying the brutality of such an action, the unproblematic status with which this episode is endowed deserves analysis. After all, an event of this kind (particularly one so distant from America)¹ does not in and of itself constitute a danger, risk, or threat. It was possible for the leadership of the United States to have concluded that no matter how much it disapproved of the turn of events, the situation did not demand a full-scale response, and the initial period of what later became understood as a crisis was taken up with political debates over how and to what extent the United States should commit itself to act. Indeed, there have been any number of examples in which similar “facts” were met with a very different American reaction: only a decade earlier, the Iraqi invasion of Iran (an oil-producing state like Kuwait) brought no apocalyptic denunciations or calls to action, let alone a military response, from the United States.

Danger is not an objective condition. It [sic] is not a thing that exists independently of those to whom it may become a threat. To illustrate this, consider the manner in which the insurance industry assesses risk. In François Ewald's formulation, insurance is a technology of risk the principal function of which is not compensation or reparation, but rather the operation of a schema of rationality distinguished by the calculus of probabilities. In insurance, according to this logic, danger (or, more accurately, risk) is “neither an event nor a general

kind of event occurring in reality... but a specific mode of treatment of certain events capable of happening to a group of individuals." In other words, for the technology of risk in insurance, "Nothing is a risk in itself; there is no risk in reality. But on the other hand, anything *can* be a risk; it all depends on how one analyzes the danger, considers the event. As Kant might have put it, the category of risk is a category of the understanding; it cannot be given in sensibility or intuition."² In these terms, danger is an effect of interpretation. Danger bears no essential, necessary, or unproblematic relation to the action or event from which it is said to derive. Nothing is intrinsically more dangerous for insurance technology than anything else, except when interpreted as such.

This understanding of the necessarily interpretive basis of risk has important implications for international relations. It does not deny that there are "real" dangers in the world: infectious diseases, accidents, and political violence (among others) have consequences that can literally be understood in terms of life and death. But not all risks are equal, and not all risks are interpreted as dangers. Modern society contains a veritable cornucopia of danger; indeed, there is such an abundance of risk that it is impossible to objectively know all that threatens us.³ Those events or factors that we identify as dangerous come to be ascribed as such only through an interpretation of their various dimensions of dangerousness. Moreover, that process of interpretation does not depend on the incidence of "objective" factors for its veracity. For example, HIV infection has been considered by many to be America's major public health issue, yet pneumonia and influenza, diabetes, suicide, and chronic liver disease have all been individually responsible for many more deaths.⁴ Equally, an interpretation of danger has licensed a "war on (illegal) drugs" in the United States, despite the fact that the consumption level of (and the number of deaths that result from) licit drugs exceeds by a considerable order of magnitude that associated with illicit drugs. And "terrorism" is often cited as a major threat to national security, even though its occurrence within the United States is minimal (notwithstanding the bombings in Oklahoma City and at the World Trade Center in New York) and its contribution to international carnage minor.⁵

Furthermore, the role of interpretation in the articulation of danger is not restricted to the process by which some risks come to be considered more serious than others. An important function of interpretation is the way that certain modes of representation crystallize around referents marked as dangers. Given the often tenuous relationship between an interpretation of danger and the "objective" inci-

dence of behaviors and factors thought to constitute it, the capacity for a particular risk to be represented in terms of characteristics revealed in the community said to be threatened can be an important impetus to an interpretation of danger. As later chapters will demonstrate, the ability to represent things as alien, subversive, dirty, or sick has been pivotal to the articulation of danger in the American experience.

In this context, it is also important to note that there need not be an action or event to provide the grounds for an interpretation of danger. The mere existence of an alternative mode of being, the presence of which exemplifies that different identities are possible and thus denaturalizes the claim of a particular identity to be *the* true identity, is sometimes enough to produce the understanding of a threat.⁶ In consequence, only in these terms is it possible to understand how some acts of international power politics raise not a whit of concern, while something as seemingly unthreatening as the novels of a South American writer can be considered such a danger to national security that his exclusion from the country is warranted.⁷ For both insurance and international relations, therefore, danger results from the calculation of a threat that objectifies events, disciplines relations, and sequesters an ideal of the identity of the people said to be at risk.

These qualities of danger were evident in the Persian Gulf crisis. In announcing that the United States was sending military forces to Saudi Arabia, President Bush declared: "In the life of a nation, we're called upon to define who we are and what we believe."⁸ By manifestly linking American identity to danger, the president highlighted the indispensability of interpretation to the determination of a threat, and tacitly invoked the theme of this study: that the boundaries of a state's identity are secured by the representation of danger integral to foreign policy.

The invasion of Kuwait is not the subject of this book. But it does serve as a useful touchstone by which to outline some of the assumptions undergirding this study. Consider, for example, this question: How did the Iraqi invasion become the greatest danger to the United States? Two answers to this question seem obvious and were common. Those indebted to a power-politics understanding of world politics, with its emphasis on the behavior of states calculated in rational terms according to the pursuit of power, understood the invasion to be an easily observable instance of naked aggression against an independent, sovereign state. To those indebted to an economic understanding, in which the underlying forces of capital accumulation are determinative of state behavior, the U.S.-led response, like the Iraqi

invasion, was explicable in terms of the power of oil, markets, and the military-industrial complex.

Each of these characterizations is surely a caricature. The range of views in the debate over this crisis was infinitely more complex than is suggested by these two positions; there were many whose analyses differed from those with whom they might normally be associated, and indebtedness to a tradition does not determine one's argument in every instance. But the purpose of overdrawing these positions (which we might call, in equally crude terms, realist and Marxist) is to make the point that although each is usually thought to be the antinomy of the other, they both equally efface the indispensability of interpretation in the articulation of danger. As such, they share a disposition from which this analysis differs. Committed to an *epistemic realism*—whereby the world comprises objects whose existence is independent of ideas or beliefs about them—both of these understandings maintain that there are material causes to which events and actions can be reduced. And occasioned by this epistemic realism, they sanction two other analytic forms: a *narrativizing historiography* in which things have a self-evident quality that allows them to speak for themselves, and a *logic of explanation* in which the purpose of analysis is to identify those self-evident things and material causes so that actors can accommodate themselves to the realm of necessity they encounter.⁹ Riven with various demands, insistences, and assertions that things "must" be either this or that, this disposition is the most common metatheoretical discourse among practitioners of the discipline of international relations.¹⁰

But there are alternative ways to think, and this book exhibits a commitment to one of them. Contrary to the claims of epistemic realism, I argue that as understanding involves rendering the unfamiliar in the terms of the familiar, there is always an ineluctable debt to interpretation such that there is nothing outside of discourse. Contrary to a narrativizing historiography, I employ a mode of historical representation that self-consciously adopts a perspective. And contrary to the logic of explanation, I embrace a logic of interpretation that acknowledges the improbability of cataloging, calculating, and specifying the "real causes," and concerns itself instead with considering the manifest political consequences of adopting one mode of representation over another.

As such, my argument is part of an emerging dissident literature in international relations that draws sustenance from a series of modern thinkers who have focused on historically specific modes of dis-

course rather than the supposedly independent realms of subjects and objects.¹¹ Starting from the position that social and political life comprises a set of practices in which things are constituted in the process of dealing with them, this dissent does not (and does not desire to) constitute a discrete methodological school claiming to magically illuminate the previously dark recesses of global politics. Nor is it the dissent of a self-confident and singular figure claiming to know the error of all previous ways and offering salvation from all theoretical sin. Rather, this form of dissent emerges from a disparate and sometimes divergent series of encounters between the traditions of international relations and theories increasingly prominent in other realms of social and political inquiry. It is a form of dissent that celebrates difference: the proliferation of perspectives, dimensions, and approaches to the very real dilemmas of global life. It is a form of dissent that celebrates the particularity and context-bound nature of judgments and assessments, not because it favors a (so-called) relativist retreat into the incalculability of alternatives, but because it recognizes the universalist conceits of all attempts to force difference into the strait-jacket of identity.¹² It is a form of dissent skeptical—but not cynical—about the traditions of international relations and their claims of adequacy to reality. It is a form of dissent that is not concerned to seek a better fit between thought and the world, language and matter, proposition and fact. On the contrary, it is a form of dissent that questions the very way our problems have been posed in these terms and the constraints within which they have been considered, focusing instead on the way the world has been made historically possible.¹³

Consequently, in attempting to understand the ways in which United States foreign policy has interpreted danger and secured the boundaries of the identity in whose name it operates, this analysis adopts neither a purely theoretical nor a purely historical mode. It is perhaps best understood in terms of a history of the present, an interpretative attitude suggested by Michel Foucault.¹⁴ A history of the present does not try to capture *the* meaning of the past, nor does it try to get *a* complete picture of the past as a bounded epoch, with underlying laws and teleology. Neither is a history of the present an instance of presentism—where the present is read back into the past—or an instance of finalism, that mode of analysis whereby the analyst maintains that a kernel of the present located in the past has inexorably progressed such that it now defines our condition. Rather, a history of the present exhibits an unequivocally contemporary orientation. Beginning with an incitement from the present—an acute man-

ifestation of a ritual of power—this mode of analysis seeks to trace how such rituals of power arose, took shape, gained importance, and effected politics.¹⁵ In short, this mode of analysis asks how certain terms and concepts have historically functioned within discourse.

To suggest as much, however, is not to argue in terms of the discursive having priority over the nondiscursive. Of course, this is the criticism most often mounted by opponents to arguments such as this, understandings apparent in formulations like “if discourse is all there is,” “if everything is language,” or “if there is no reality.”¹⁶ In so doing they unquestioningly accept that there are distinct realms of the discursive and the nondiscursive. Yet such a claim, especially after the decades of debates about language, interpretation, and understanding in the natural and social sciences, is no longer innocently sustainable. It can be reiterated as an article of faith to rally the true believers and banish the heretics, but it cannot be put forward as a self-evident truth. As Richard Rorty has acknowledged, projects like philosophy’s traditional desire to see “how language relates to the world” result in “the impossible attempt to step outside our skins—the traditions, linguistic and other, within which we do our thinking and self-criticism—and compare ourselves with something absolute.”¹⁷ The world exists independently of language, but we can never *know* that (beyond the fact of its assertion), because the existence of the world is literally inconceivable outside of language and our traditions of interpretation.¹⁸ In Foucault’s terms, “We must not resolve discourse into a play of pre-existing significations; we must not imagine that the world turns toward us a legible face which we would only have to decipher; the world is not the accomplice of our knowledge; there is no prediscursive providence which disposes the world in our favour.”¹⁹

Therefore, to talk in terms of an analysis that examines how concepts have historically functioned within discourse is to refuse the force of the distinction between discursive and nondiscursive. As Laclau and Mouffe have argued, “The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has *nothing to do* with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. . . . What is denied is not that. . . objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside of any discursive condition of emergence.”²⁰ This formulation seeks neither to banish arguments that authorize their positions through reference to “external reality,” nor to suggest that any one representation is as powerful as another. On the contrary, if we think in terms of a discursive economy—whereby discourse (the represen-

tation and constitution of the “real”) is a managed space in which some statements and depictions come to have greater value than others—the idea of “external reality” has a particular currency that is *internal* to discourse. For in a discursive economy, investments have been made in certain interpretations; dividends can be drawn by those parties that have made the investments; representations are taxed when they confront new and ambiguous circumstances; and participation in the discursive economy is through social relations that embody an unequal distribution of power. Most important, the effect of this understanding is to expand the domain of social and political inquiry: “The main consequence of a break with the discursive/extradiscursive dichotomy is the abandonment of the thought/reality opposition, and hence a major enlargement of the field of those categories which can account for social relations. Synonymy, metonymy, metaphor are not forms of thought that add a second sense to a primary, constitutive literality of social relations; instead, they are part of the primary terrain itself in which the social is constituted.”²¹ The enlargement of the interpretive imagination along these lines is necessary in order to account for many of the recent developments in world politics, and (as chapter 1 will show) to understand the texts of postwar United States foreign policy.

In the form of a history of the present, then, this analysis begins from the incitement of “the end of the cold war,” a period that is thought to portend a qualitative change in world politics. For many, the dangers of the past are a thing of the past. But one does not have to deny that world politics exhibits considerable novelty at this juncture to appreciate that United States foreign policy recognizes a range of new dangers that might occupy the place of the old. The European revolutions of 1989 and their consequences; “new global issues” such as the environment; the interpretation of drug use and trafficking as a national security issue; the representation of Japan and Germany as economic threats to security; an awareness of disease, migration, and other population issues as sources of external threat; a renewed focus on the “Third World” as the primary source of danger; the vigilance that is exercised toward new forms of violence such as “terrorism” or “Islamic fundamentalism”; and a general disquiet about the pervasive nature of ambiguity and uncertainty—all these orientations to the world stand as dangers that seem to challenge the long-standing and well-established modes of interpretation associated with the cold war.

For the most part, however, these developments have been represented in ways that do not depart dramatically from those dominant

during the cold war. To be sure, they are not represented as being reducible to Soviet behavior. But these challenges are represented as dangers, located in an external and anarchic environment, which threaten the security of an internal and domestic society, often via recourse to violence. This provokes a question: What functions have difference, danger, and otherness played in constituting the identity of the United States as a major actor in international politics? To pose the question in these terms is a little misleading, for it is not intended to suggest either that it is a strict functional requirement of American identity that difference and danger be articulated as otherness, or that only certain groups or phenomena can be other. As Foucault argued with respect to the confinement of the insane and the repression of certain sexual practices in the nineteenth century, these were not functionally the result of or required by bourgeois domination. The bourgeoisie was interested not in the mad or the phenomenon of infantile masturbation but in the procedural system through which such exclusions and controls were effected.²² In other words, groups or practices other than those targeted could have been the objects of surveillance and discipline, while those that were targeted could have been tolerated if not accepted.

In this context, for the United States, the current period in world politics can be understood as being characterized by the representation of novel challenges in terms of traditional analytics, and the varied attempts to replace one enemy with (an)other. In consequence, the argument to be made here suggests that we need a more radical response to these challenges: a response directed at the modes of interpretation that make these challenges available for apprehension, the strategies and tactics by which they are calculated as dangers, and the means by which they come to be other.

Addressing the issue of the roles danger and difference play in constituting the identity of the United States involves a deconstruction of conventional political discourse and its self-presentation, especially that effected in the practice and analysis of both international relations and foreign policy. In reorienting analysis from the concern with the intentional acts of pregiven subjects to the problematic of subjectivity, this argument proposes that United States foreign policy be understood as a political practice central to the constitution, production, and maintenance of American political identity. In order to delineate more precisely the relationship between foreign policy and political identity, this argument is predicated on a reconceptualization of understandings to which the conventional view of international relations

and foreign policy is deeply indebted — most specifically, a reconceptualization of identity and the state.

Identity and the State

Identity is an inescapable dimension of being. No body could be without it. Inescapable as it is, identity — whether personal or collective — is not fixed by nature, given by God, or planned by intentional behavior. Rather, identity is constituted in relation to difference. But neither is difference fixed by nature, given by God, or planned by intentional behavior. Difference is constituted in relation to identity.²³ The problematic of identity/difference contains, therefore, no foundations that are prior to, or outside of, its operation. Whether we are talking of “the body” or “the state,” or of particular bodies and states, the identity of each is performatively constituted. Moreover, the constitution of identity is achieved through the inscription of boundaries that serve to demarcate an “inside” from an “outside,” a “self” from an “other,” a “domestic” from a “foreign.”

In the specific case of the body, Judith Butler has argued that its boundary, as well as the border between internal and external, is “temporarily maintained” by the transformation of elements that were originally part of identity into a “defiling otherness.”²⁴ In this formulation, there is no originary or sovereign presence that inhabits a prediscursive domain and gives the body, its sex, or gender a naturalized and unproblematic quality. To be sure, many insist on understanding the body, sex, and gender as naturalized and unproblematic. But for their claim to be persuasive, we would have to overlook (among other issues) the multifarious normalizing codes that abound in our society for the constitution and disciplining of sexuality. In seeking to establish and police understandings of what constitutes the normal, the accepted, and the desirable, such codes effect an admission of their constructed nature and the contingent and problematic nature of the identity of the body.

Understanding the gendered identity of the body as performative means that we regard it as having “no ontological status apart from the various acts that constitute its reality.” As such, the idea that gender is an interior essence definitive of the body’s identity is a discursively constructed notion that is required for the purposes of disciplining sexuality. In this context, genders are neither “true” or “false,” nor “normal” or “abnormal,” but “are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity.” Moreover, gender can be understood as “an identity tenuously constituted in time,

instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*”; an identity achieved, “*not [through] a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition.*”²⁵

Choosing the question of gender and the body as an exemplification of the theme of identity is not to suggest that as an “individual” instance of identity the performative constitution of gender and the body is prior to and determinative of instances of collective identity. In other words, I am not claiming that the state is analogous to an individual with a settled identity. To the contrary, I want to suggest that the performative constitution of gender and the body is analogous to the performative constitution of the state. Specifically, I want to suggest that we can understand the state as having “no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality”; that its status as the sovereign presence in world politics is produced by “a discourse of primary and stable identity”; and that the identity of any particular state should be understood as “tenuously constituted in time... through a *stylized repetition of acts*,” and achieved, “*not [through] a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition.*”

Moreover, the similitude between the body and the state exceeds the status of being simply heuristically useful if we think of gender as the effect of a discourse about primary and stable identity, in terms of what Joan Cocks has called a “regime of Masculine/feminine.”²⁶ For Cocks the regime of Masculine/feminine is a disciplinary regime of truth that is prevalent in our culture and contains contingency through the production of “male” and “female” as stable identities. Most important, this regime effects a double move: “it imposes on each of the two kinds of bodies a particular norm and characteristic deviation, [and] it imposes on all bodies the rule that masculinity is the norm of active desire and femininity is active desire’s deviation.”²⁷ Informed by the understanding of power as productive and not confined to the boundaries or institutions of the juridical state, Cocks’s regime of Masculine/feminine is one of the ensemble of practices that give rise to the “society of normalization” about which Foucault wrote.²⁸ Characterized by discipline and domination through multiple forms of subjugation, rather than by the uniform authority of sovereignty located in a single point, a society of normalization secures the content and confines of its identity through the imposition of a norm rather than the enforcement of a rule. In so doing, it encourages and legitimizes certain dispositions and orientations while opposing and delegitimizing others, a process that is neither deterministic in its operation nor totally hegemonic in its consequences.

Cocks’s argument is directed primarily at how the regime of Masculine/feminine disciplines the sexed body. But given the culturally pervasive nature of the gender norms it is concerned with, it is not implausible to suggest that a similar regime—or at least the gender norms that it effects—operates in other domains and disciplines other identities, such as the state. Indeed, if we consider how our understanding of politics is heavily indebted to a discursive economy in which reason, rationality, and masculinity are licensed as superior to unreason, irrationality, and femininity, it is not difficult to appreciate that gender norms have also helped constitute the norms of statecraft. Therefore, in terms of the axiological dimension of spatializing practices, “the body” can be understood as being a historically well-established analog for the constitution of state identity. This becomes even more apparent when we think of how “the body politic” functions as a regulating and normalizing trope for “the political” (a discussion found in chapter 4). Moreover, central to that regulation and normalization, and to be understood as a privileged instance of the stylized repetition of acts, is foreign policy and the articulation of danger.²⁹ Accordingly, the identity of the state that is contained and reproduced through foreign policy is likely to be inscribed with prior codes of gender that will in turn operate as norms by which future conduct is judged and threats are calculated.³⁰

But if there are no primary and stable identities, and if the identities many had thought of as primary and stable, such as the body and the state, are performatively constituted, how can international relations speak of such foundational concepts as “the state,” “security,” “war,” “danger,” “sovereignty,” and so on? After all, isn’t security determined by the requirements of a preexisting sovereign state and war conducted in its name as a response to an objective danger? How then can we speak of these categories once we acknowledge the non-essentialistic character of danger?

Indeed, much of the conventional literature on the nation and the state implies that the essence of the former precedes the reality of the latter: that the identity of a “people” is the basis for the legitimacy of the state and its subsequent practices. However, much of the recent historical sociology on this topic has argued that the state more often than not precedes the nation: that nationalism is a construct of the state in pursuit of its legitimacy. Benedict Anderson, for example, has argued in compelling fashion that “the nation” should be understood as an “imagined political community” that exists only insofar as it is a cultural artifact that is represented textually.³¹ Equally, Charles Tilly

has argued that any coordinated, hierarchical, and territorial entity should be only understood as a "national state." He stresses that few of these national states have ever become or presently are "nation-states" — national states whose sovereign territorialization is perfectly aligned with a prior and primary form of identification, such as religion, language, or symbolic sense of self. Even modern-day Great Britain, France, and Germany (and, equally, the United States, Australia, and Canada) cannot be considered nation-states even though they are national states.³² The importance of these perspectives is that they allow us to understand national states as unavoidably paradoxical entities that do not possess prediscursive, stable identities. As a consequence, all states are marked by an inherent tension between the various domains that need to be aligned for an "imagined political community" to come into being — such as territoriality and the many axes of identity — and the demand that such an alignment is a response to (rather than constitutive of) a prior and stable identity. In other words, states are never finished as entities; the tension between the demands of identity and the practices that constitute it can never be fully resolved, because the performative nature of identity can never be fully revealed. This paradox inherent to their being renders states in permanent need of reproduction: with no ontological status apart from the many and varied practices that constitute their reality, states are (and have to be) always in a process of becoming. For a state to end its practices of representation would be to expose its lack of prediscursive foundations; stasis would be death.³³ Moreover, the drive to fix the state's identity and contain challenges to the state's representation cannot finally or absolutely succeed. Aside from recognizing that there is always an excess of being over appearance that cannot be contained by disciplinary practices implicated in state formation, were it possible to reduce all being to appearance, and were it possible to bring about the absence of movement which in that reduction of being to appearance would characterize pure security, it would be at that moment that the state would wither away.³⁴ At that point all identities would have congealed, all challenges would have evaporated, and all need for disciplinary authorities and their fields of force would have vanished. Should the state project of security be successful in the terms in which it is articulated, the state would cease to exist. Security as the absence of movement would result in death via stasis. Ironically, then, the inability of the state project of security to succeed is the guarantor of the state's continued success as an impelling identity.

The constant articulation of danger through foreign policy is thus not a threat to a state's identity or existence: it is its condition of possibility. While the objects of concern change over time, the techniques and exclusions by which those objects are constituted as dangers persist. Such an argument, however, is occluded by the traditional representations of international politics through their debts to epistemic realism and its effacement of interpretation. Grounded in an interrogation of discursive practices within the study of international relations and the conduct of United States foreign policy, this study seeks to show how these themes and issues are immanent to these domains. Through a rethinking of the practice and theory of foreign policy in chapters 1, 2, and 3; a discussion in chapter 4 of the dominant modes of representing danger; and a consideration of the figuration of difference at various foundational moments in the American experience in chapter 5, this book posits the validity (though not incontestability) of an alternative interpretation of the cold war, which is elaborated in chapter 6. The hope is that this analysis can highlight some of the political issues at stake in the post-cold war era, as chapters 7 and 8 argue. The epilogue evaluates the efflorescence of concern with the politics of identity by those perspectives previously inattentive to these concerns, and considers the modes of interpretation that are more adequately attuned to the issues.