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Identity/Security

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Identity is a social construct. So is security. Conventional approaches to security have, for long, denied the constructedness of both, offering instead a conception that takes identity as pre-given and its relationship to security as negative – i.e. identity concerns as a source of insecurity. Increasingly since the 1990s, critical approaches to security have revealed the identity/security nexus as one of co-constitution, which allowed for considering identity as a source of security as well. In doing so, critical approaches have looked into identity dynamics in broader terms – i.e. not only in terms of ethnic, religious, linguistic differences, but in terms of a wide range of 'self–other' dynamics.

The Return of Identity?

It is a characteristic of wisdom in the field of security studies that identity has, for long, been absent. In the early 1990s, as the post-Cold War euphoria turned into despair following the proliferation of violent conflicts in various parts of the world (e.g. the Balkans, Africa), they were popularly viewed as related to concerns with identity. The end result was portrayed in the scholarly world as the 'return' of identity to the study (Lapid and Kratochwil 1996) and practice (Brown 1993; Henderson 1997; Lacina 2004; Rogers 2002; Rogers and Dando 1992; Seul 1999) of international relations and security studies. This trend was later reinforced by the September 11 attacks that were popularly framed as a clash rooted in cultural differences.

Emblematic of the so-called 'return' of identity has been Samuel P. Huntington's *Foreign Affairs* article, 'Clash of Civilizations?' (Huntington 1993a; see also, Huntington 1993b, 1996) where the author identified clashes between groups and states with different civilizational affiliations as 'the next pattern of conflict'. Notwithstanding its numerous loopholes, which were identified by many (see e.g. Henderson and Tucker 2001; Chiozza 2002; Gartzke and Gleditsch 2006; Gusterson 2004; Sen 2006), Huntington's article served as a catalyst for effectively bringing identity concerns back into security debates.

Here, it is crucial to distinguish between the absences of identity in the study of security and in security practice. Whereas concerns with identity were indeed missing

from conventional approaches to security, this absence marked a past presence – the legacy of previous generations' violent practices justified with reference to differences in identity (as with the 'Thirty Years' War' in Europe). The absence of identity concerns from the study of security thus was a response to the insecurities of an earlier era. As Michael C. Williams (1998a: 205) underscored, the progenitors of the 'liberal sensibility' sought to 'confute these beliefs in theory, to marginalise them in practice, and to replace them with new forms of understandings and political action, and in doing so transform fundamentally the politics of violence and the nature of security'. Understood as such, the absence of identity from the conventional approaches to security constituted a 'negative identity practice'; by way of limiting the definition of 'knowledge' to knowledge about the material world warranted by an empiricist epistemology, an attempt was made to transform practice, thereby '[removing] the destructive conflict engendered by irresolvable questions of religious truth from the political realm' (Williams 1998a: 211).

That said, identity was never totally absent from the study of security. A literature developing on the margins of security studies highlighted the roles culture and identity played in shaping Cold War dynamics (Booth 1979; Kaldor 1990; Klein 1990; Shapiro 1990). Furthermore, security in the developing world was often studied through the prism of ethnic or religious differences (see e.g. Horowitz 1985; Levine 1986; Gurr *et al.* 1994). A third line of research pointed to gender as a factor shaping the dynamics of the study (Cohn 1987) and the practice (Enloe 1989) of security worldwide.

Taken together these three sets of literature serve to remind that the 'negative identity practice' of the more conventional approaches to security was not fully successful. While such practice has indeed 'confuted' concerns with identity in conventional security theory, it failed to 'marginalize' them in practice. Accordingly, scholars employing conventional approaches to security had to face the limits of their conceptual and methodological toolkit as they encountered concerns with identity in their research. Consider, by way of illustration, Stephen Walt's *The Origins of Alliances* (1987), where the author portrayed the practice of balancing between Arab states as 'different'. The difference stemmed from the ways in which Arab actors responded not (only) to changes in the balance of military power, but also challenges to their image. Yet Walt was not able to analyse such 'representational power-balancing' (Mattern 2000: 306), for he relied on the materialist-empiricist framework of neo-realism. As Michael Barnett (1998) has highlighted, non-material aspects (as with identity) also demanded close attention in studying inter-Arab relations. Security in the Arab world was often 'not tied to material power but presentational politics' as 'few alliances among Arab states were a response to shifts in material power, and many more were efforts at impression management' (Barnett 1998: 2).

To recapitulate: it would be inaccurate to say that identity concerns were missing from the study and practice of security during the Cold War. While conventional approaches to security suffered from the limits of their conceptual and methodological toolkit that disallowed systematic study of the identity/security nexus, a rich literature began to emerge on the margins of security studies (see e.g. Acharya 1998; Booth 1991a, 1991b; Campbell 1992; Campbell 1998; Krause and Williams 1997; McSweeney 1999; Tickner 1992, 1995; Weldes *et al.* 1999). The latter has offered fresh insight into the study of the identity/ security nexus in two main ways: (1) through revealing identity as a social construct; (2) through revealing the relationship between identity and security as one of co-constitution thereby opening up room for understanding identity as a source of security as well. As such, this new literature has come against the received wisdom in conventional approaches to

security. The following presents an overview of this burgeoning literature in terms of the two axes of insight it offers.

Where Do Identities Come From?

Conventional approaches to security give either one of two standard responses to this question. Whereas neo-realists take state identity to be exogenously given and constant (all are egoists as a product of the push and pull of the anarchical system), neo-liberals allow for exogenously given identities to change (egoists seeking to cooperate under conditions of anarchy) (cf. Walt 1987; Keohane 1988). In treating identities as exogenously given, 'the idea that taking questions of identity seriously may require a different understanding of group formation and interaction is never raised' by either of the two conventional approaches (Krause and Williams 1996: 240). While it is indeed possible to understand such neglect of identity concerns as a product of the 'liberal sensibility' of 'seeking liberty and security from the 'enthusiasm' of others' (Williams 1998a: 211), the resulting treatment of identity by these very approaches have produced analyses that seem to have betrayed the same 'liberal' sensibilities.

Consider Barry Posen's article 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict' (1993). Different from Walt, Posen sought to integrate national identity as a factor in analysing the conflicts that followed the Yugoslav and Soviet break-up. Yet, in the absence of conceptual and methodological tools that would have allowed him to analyse identity differently, Posen relied on a primordialist notion of identity. This proved problematic in two ways. First, Posen sought to provide an explanation that took into account the role group identity and collective memory played in shaping conflict dynamics, while his choice of method only allowed for the study of material factors. Accordingly, as he took identity as pre-given, Posen proposed an explanation that was – as Paul Roe (1999: 189) highlighted – 'rather Wendtian', thereby revealing a contradiction in his framework. Second, Posen, through bringing in identity in the way that he did (i.e. introducing a primordialist notion of identity into neo-realism) ended up reinforcing the determinacy of material factors (i.e. military power) with the determinacy of non-material factors (i.e. national identity).

The point being, the ways in which conventional approaches have sought to integrate identity concerns into their materialist-empiricist framework have served to highlight why the progenitors of the 'liberal sensibility' had excluded them in the first instance. In seeking to respond to the 'return' of identity concerns to security practice, conventional approaches have bought into primordialist notions of identity and ended up offering research that betrayed its roots in overcoming the practices of those who justify resort to violence with reference to presumed differences in identity. Whereas, as Roland Bleiker has argued,

> Difference does not necessarily lead to violence. The source of conflict is located in the political manipulation of the tension between identity and difference, in attempts to isolate a few arbitrary selected elements of the past in order to construct around them a mythological division between inside and outside ... Once these artificial demarcations of identity have become internalized in language, school curricula, political institutions, moral discourses, and the like, their mythical origin appears more and more real until the ensuing worldview, and the conflicts that they generate, seem inevitable, even natural.
>
> (Bleiker 2005: 116)

Alexander Wendt took issue with conventional approaches 'that take identities and interests as pre-given, and revealed them to be products of an inter-subjective structure. Echoing Mary Kaldor's (1990) characterization of the superpower rivalry as 'imaginary war', Wendt made the point that

> The Cold War was a social structure in virtue of which the United States and the USSR had certain identities. They were embedded in 'national security worldviews' (in terms of which each defined self and other) and in role positions in a social structure ... The content of national interests was in part a function of these structurally constituted identities (as well as of domestic ones).
>
> (Wendt 1994: 386)

Having revealed identity to be endogenous to state interaction, Wendt went on to show that 'self-help and power politics do not follow either logically or causally from anarchy and that if today we find ourselves in a self-help world, this is due to process, not structure' (Wendt 1999a: 394). In line with Barry Buzan's (1991b) notion of 'mature anarchy', Wendt offered that

> There is no 'logic' of anarchy apart from the practices that create and instantiate one structure of identities and interests rather than another; structure has no existence or causal powers apart from process. Self-help and power politics are institutions not essential features of anarchy. *Anarchy is what states make of it.*
>
> (Wendt 1992: 394–5)

Recognizing identity as a social construct has significant implications for the study of international security as it opens up room for inquiring into identity change transformative of security relations. Viewed through the lens of conventional approaches, egoist state identity does not allow for security beyond manœuvres of power balancing and deterrence (neo-realism) (Walt 1987) or temporary cooperation beyond security regimes (neo-liberalism) (Jervis 1982). Whereas recognizing identity as a social construct allows considering 'how social processes and international community may transform security politics' (Adler and Barnett 1998: 12). Calling for recognizing identity as a social construct, therefore, is not a mere plea for the formation of security communities, but rather a plea for adopting a theoretical framework that does not render invisible already existing ones (see the contributions to Adler and Barnett 1998).

That said, recognizing the constructedness of identity also allows for imagining the formation of security communities worldwide. While the existence of a security community in Western Europe is widely recognized, its formation is popularly understood to be rooted in and eased by a pre-existing 'European' identity. Whereas, as Bill McSweeney (1999) has argued, identity in 'Europe' has been reconstructed through the formation of the European Community (later the European Union) which, in turn, allowed for the institutionalization of non-war relations among a group of states that had fought two very destructive wars in the first half of the twentieth century. It would therefore be historically inaccurate to give causal power to 'European' identity in the formation of a security community in Western Europe for it also worked the other way around. 'European' identity was (re)constructed by the transformation of identities and interests of various actors through the development of the European Community (Wæver 1998; McSweeney 1999). Denaturalizing the role identity played in the formation of Western European security community and laying bare

the role human agency played in the process thus allows for imagining the transformation of security relations in other parts of the world.

Conventional approaches' understanding of identity as exogenously given is problematic not only because it disallows security communities in theory and practice, but also (perhaps more so) because it disallows capturing the very dynamics they seek to explain – as with the 'security dilemma'. Considered to be the 'perennial dilemma' of world politics, the security dilemma is defined as the 'irresolvable uncertainty' state B faces when interpreting state A's weapons acquisition programme – 'defensive' or 'offensive'? Choosing to err on the side of caution, policy-makers in state B often assume A's actions to be 'offensive' and start (or hasten) their own weapons acquisition programme. In the end, state A's search for security through rearmament results in insecurity as it triggers an arms race. Conventional approaches to security explain the security dilemma dynamics with reference to egoist state identity and the problem of uncertainty in world politics, which increase policy-makers' lenience towards worst-case thinking. Yet, as Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler (2007: 60–1) have shown, worst-case scenarios as such persist only because conventional approaches assume a 'logical convergence of external interests and weapons acquisition'. Whereas 'the material facts of weapons never speak for themselves; weapons speak through the cognitive system of interpreters' (Booth and Wheeler 2007: 61). What shapes (and is shaped by) the cognitive system of actors is identity. Even a seemingly primal response such as fear is mediated through identity. To quote Booth and Wheeler,

> Policy-makers always bring something to an encounter, and, in the twentieth century, ideological convictions were often decisive in resolving dilemmas of interpretation and response. In some cases this led to … ideological fundamentalism … which assigns enemy status because of what the other is – its political identity – rather than how it actually behaves.
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> (2007: 64–5)

Conventional accounts that take identity as pre-given cannot imagine a way out of the security dilemma, for they fail to capture the role politics plays in the (re)construction of those very identities.

To reiterate: recognizing the constructedness of identity has immense significance for security. Through recognizing identity as a social construct, critical approaches to security have opened up room for a transformation in security relations through responding differently to the condition of anarchy (Wendt 1999b), transcending the security dilemma (Booth and Wheeler 2007), creating security communities (Adler and Barnett 1998), 'crafting international order' (Mattern 2005), reconsidering relations in/with the developing world (Doty 1996a), the 'eastern' other (Neumann 1999), Bosnia and the 'Balkans' (Campbell 1998; Hansen 2006), Australia (Burke 2001), the Soviet Union/Russia (Hopf 2002), 'Divided Korea' (Bleiker 2005), the 'Middle East' (Bilgin 2005), and 'migrants' in Europe (Huysmans 2006).

How to Study Identity/Security?

Even as they agree on the constructedness of identity, critical approaches to security differ in the study of identity/security. To pick up an example from feminist approaches, while some have sought to unveil how notions of security are not gender neutral and that they

do not relate positively to women's security (Caprioli 2004a; Enloe 1989; Tickner 1992, 1995), others have highlighted the patriarchal philosophy that empowers statism in the study and practice of security and warrants narrow definitions of democracy and human rights (Agathangelou and Ling 2004, 2005). Such differences crystallized in a debate dubbed the 'Copenhagen Controversy' (Williams 1998b) concerning the study of 'societal security'.

The notion of 'societal security' was introduced by Ole Wæver (1993) to highlight the insecurities of societies as they differed from (if not caused by) the insecurities of states. He wrote:

> In the contemporary international system, societal security concerns the ability of a society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions and possible or actual threats. More specifically, it is about the sustainability, within acceptable conditions for evolution, of traditional patterns of language, culture, association, and religious and national identity and custom.
>
> (Wæver 1993: 23)

While Wæver (1993: 23) declined to start with an 'objective definition of when there is a threat to societal security' and expressed preference for studying 'situations when societies perceive a threat in identity terms', some others who used the concept in their empirical studies fell back upon treating identity almost as a 'fact of society' (see the contributions to Wæver *et al.* 1993), thereby eliciting McSweeney's (1999) criticisms regarding 'objectivism'. The debate that ensued highlighted what is at stake in how one responds to the question heading this section.

In contrast to Wæver *et al.* (1993) who focused on 'the politics around the established identities' (Buzan and Wæver 1997: 243), McSweeney highlighted the problems of treating any form of identity as a 'thing'. He wrote:

> Identity is not a fact of society; it is a process of negotiation among people and interest groups ... a conflict of interests and a problem of security have coexisted with a conflict of identity between unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland, between Serbs and Croats in former Yugoslavia, between Jews and Palestinians in Israel, between republics in the former USSR. The security problem is not there just because people have separate identities; it may well be the case that they have separate identities because of the security problem.
>
> (McSweeney 1999: 73)

What is out there to be studied, insisted McSweeney (1999: 77–8), is not collective identity, but 'identity discourse on the part of political leaders, intellectuals and countless others, who engage in the process of constructing, negotiating, manipulating or affirming a response to the demand – at times urgent, mostly absent – for a collective image'.

McSweeney and the Copenhagen School debated whether collective identity could (even momentarily) be treated as a 'thing' or whether it is narrative all the way down. Janice Bially Mattern recast the debate at the macro-level. While the 'Copenhagen controversy' had consequences for understanding conflicts and the potential for their resolution, Mattern's discussion addressed the subject of 'ordering' world politics.

In a way not dissimilar to McSweeney, Mattern (2005: 10, 14) distinguished between those who assumed 'a socially settled foundation' in the study of identity and those who 'begin and end with narratives and their authors'. Contra Wendt and other 'conventional

constructivists' who theorize about international identity 'as though it develops only in situations where states already share an epistemological order, that is, where they are already mutually oriented toward each other's "nature" or "essence"' (also see Hopf 1998), Mattern (2005: 10, 12) developed an account of international identities as 'power-laden narrative constructs'. She explained the need for this move as follows:

> For constructivism, the identity-formation and maintenance process takes place only against the backdrop of settled social facts, so it logically follows that when those social facts are unsettled – during crises – identity formation and maintenance cannot occur. Thus, if one proceeds from the constructivist model, the only logical conclusion is that international identity cannot be a source of international order.
>
> (Mattern 2005: 9–10)

Recognizing identity as a narrative, argued Mattern (2005: 15), allows for understanding how identities are reproduced even during times of crises, i.e. how identity provides 'the shared knowledge sufficient to impose international order upon disorder'. Accordingly, it becomes possible to understand how security communities are maintained – through recourse to 'representational force' that reconstructs actors' identities.

McSweeney and Mattern's call to study collective identity as a narrative revealed how much is at stake in choosing how to study identity/security. Taking identity as a 'thing' with a 'socially settled foundation', while heuristically powerful in security analysis (see e.g. Katzenstein 1996), renders impossible capturing the process of co-constitution between identity and security. Failing to capture the mutually constitutive relationship between identity and security, in turn, renders incomplete our understanding not only of the processes through which security communities are constructed (Adler and Barnett 1998) and maintained during times of crises (Mattern 2005), but also the production of insecurity through the process of constructing and maintaining communities at the local or international level (see the contributions to Weldes *et al.* 1999; Mattern 2001).

Consider, by way of illustration, Jutta Weldes's (1999b, 1999a) study of the Cuban Missile Crisis. What rendered the 'Cuban Missile Crisis' a crisis, argued Weldes, was not the mere presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba or the strategic threat posed by those missiles. 'After all, the Soviet Union lived with U.S. missiles in Turkey without insisting on a "Turkish missile crisis", so, crises are not inherent in the presence of enemy missiles, even nuclear ones, near one's borders' (Weldes 1999b: 36). What the US policy-makers found particularly threatening was the challenge those missiles posed to US identity as the 'leader of the Free World'. It was not merely the destructive (material) capability of the Soviet missiles but the destructive political consequences of the Soviet and Cuban daring and ability to transfer and plant those missiles in the US 'backyard' that constituted a threat to its security. Hence the conclusion of Weldes *et al.* (1999: 11): 'insecurity, rather than being external to the object to which it presents a threat, is both implicated in and an effect of the very process of establishing and re-establishing the object's identity'.

Pointing to the insecurities produced through the construction of identity need not be taken as conflating difference with otherness (Connolly 1991) or otherness with insecurity (Campbell 1994; Rumelili 2004). Nor is it to assume that insecurities to one's identity could only be found elsewhere. One's identity could be constituted *vis-à-vis* geographically distant others (Neumann 1999), 'strangers' (Huysmans 1998) or one's own forefathers (Wæver 1998). Study of the latter is currently burgeoning in the critical literature under the title of 'ontological security'.

Initially articulated by Jef Huysmans (1998: 241–4; also see McSweeney 1999) in counter-distinction to 'daily security' (as in security policy), ontological security

> is a strategy of managing the limits of reflexivity – death as the undetermined – by fixing social relations into a symbolic and institutional order. It does not primarily refer to threat definition – in the sense of enemy construction – or threat management but concerns the general question of the political – how to order social relations while simultaneously guaranteeing the very activity of ordering itself.
>
> (Huysmans 1998: 242)

The search for ontological security, then, can threaten the very physical security of states because they find security in the uncertainty in a self/other relationship institutionalized by the security dilemma (Mitzen 2006) or the 'humanitarian' acts of intervention abroad (Steele 2007). As such, the research agenda of 'ontological security' turns on its head the very assumptions upon which conventional approaches have rested: that is, security as the avoidance of physical harm caused by 'others'.

To recapitulate: scholars who converge on recognizing the constructedness of identity have differed on their approaches to the study of identity/security dynamics. While some chose to study identity at a 'frozen' moment in time, others researched the very fluidity of identity/security dynamics. The latter group of scholars have produced significant insights as they turned on its head the age-old assumption of conventional approaches through unveiling insecurity as a source of identity and the potential for ontological security to rest on a degree of physical insecurity. As the same time, scholars have engaged in lively debates that furthered the critical agenda into territories long neglected by the conventional approaches as with 'post-colonial insecurities' (Abraham 1998; Krishna 1999; Muppidi 1999), East–West relations beyond the US–USSR rivalry (Ling 2002a, 2002b), religion and secularism (Lautsen and Wæver 2003).

Conclusion

Various contributors to new thinking about security are often dismissed for being interested in 'soft' security as opposed to its 'hard' (i.e. military) aspects. Putting aside the patently gendered hierarchy that is sought to be created between conventional and critical approaches to security, what is significant in such dismissal is the way in which it overlooks how critical approaches 'better' account for the material through considering the non-material as well as the material. This is nowhere better explained than in the following excerpt by McSweeney:

> *si vis pacem, para bellum* – serves to deflect attention from the question of identity, which is central to our conception of security and to any attempt to match security policy to the threats to which it is a response. If the identity of states is externally fixed in egoism, the preparation for war must indeed be the indispensable basis of security policy. If the structure which determines the relations between states is objectively and inescapably anarchic, then insecurity is an environmental constant and the condition of peace must be eternal vigilance of military autarky. But then, how did the Cold War end?
>
> (McSweeney 1999: 5)

The question on which this quote ends had initially encouraged students of security to (re)turn to identity. It was the failure to explain (but not to predict) the end of the Cold War that had driven the conventional approaches to security to disrepute (Booth 1991a; Gusterson 1999). More than two decades after the end of the Cold War, critical approaches have made significant headway in exploring the identity/security nexus. In doing so, they have returned security studies to the central position they had previously come to occupy in international relations debates.