




ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY - WHAT'S BEHIND THIS NEW THEORY TRENDING IN IR?

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 Von gast

 Kommentieren

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In recent years, Ontological Security Theory (OST) has been established as a new theory in the field of International Relations. The theory seeks to explain state behavior, and offers a new perspective on the security dilemma and the persistence of conflicts. It has proven itself helpful in explaining seemingly irrational state behavior such as an aggressive foreign policy by weak states or the provision of humanitarian aid by powerful nations. OST further allows scholars to analyze norm-violating behavior of states, for instance the use of torture at the hands of Americans in the War on Terror. If you have not engaged with the theory

before, you might want to learn about its core arguments as well as its potential and limitations in the following. For those who know the theory well, let me show you how the theory was key to gaining new insights in my research.



CORE ARGUMENTS OF THE THEORY

OST has been developed in the last decade by scholars of international relations, peace and conflict studies, sociology, psychology, and other areas. It has quickly gained popularity. In March 2017, the journal *Cooperation and Conflict* released an issue dedicated entirely to ontological security. Notable scholars working on OST include Brent Steele (2008a) and Jennifer Mitzen (2006). According to OST scholars, states do not merely seek physical security but also ontological security, i.e. the security of the state self-identity. States are thus not only interested in survival (as realists assert) but also in the continuation of the self, i.e. the confidence that the self will prevail in the international order.¹ Sometimes, this interest in ontological security might conflict with the interest in physical security, and states might risk physical insecurity for ontological security (Mitzen 2006; Mitzen and Schweller 2011; Steele 2008a).

OST scholars aim at explaining the (seemingly irrational) behavior of states. For instance, Brent Steele (2008a) discusses the paradox of states following moral actions such as providing humanitarian aid although this costs them in material terms (2f; also see Steele 2007). Traditionally,

constructivists have explained moral state behavior by focusing on the power of disciplining discourses and the role of international institutions and transnational advocacy networks (cf. Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1999; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999). OST adds a rational component to the constructivist account of moral state behavior: states follow moral actions because this helps them sustain their self-identities and thus satisfies their ontological security needs (Steele 2008a: 2f).

While states engage in moral behavior because they are interested in fulfilling ontological security needs, states also engage in destructive behavior for ontological security reasons. Mitzen (2006) shows that states might compromise physical security for ontological security by the example of the security dilemma (341f). States become attached to established roles and routines because they sustain self-identity and thus provide ontological security. Hence, routines (as “cognitive and behavioral responses”) are followed even when they are destructive and endanger the actor (Mitzen 2006: 346). In the example of the security dilemma, uncertainty is not so much responsible for conflict as certainty, i.e. the attachment to established roles and routines (353f).

In OST, routines and narratives play important roles as they sustain the self-identity of the state. Routines are automatic reactions that are rarely reflected upon. They provide a sense of continuity and certainty in an international environment of

constant change and uncertainty. Therefore, routines are rarely changed and can be the reason why conflicts persist. In this context, work has been done on the case of Israel (Bar-Tal 2001). Furthermore, narratives are essential for a state's self-identity because they justify actions and give meaning to a state's behavior. Through narratives, states link behavior (e.g. humanitarian aid or foreign aggression) to the understanding of the self (Steele 2008a: 10). Moreover, (biographical) narratives are used to sustain the state self-identity (Berenskoetter 2014: 262). Government representatives of a state employ biographical narratives in political discourse (e.g. narratives of belonging) in order to provide a sense of stability to the public (Marlow 2002: 248ff). Especially in times of crises, narratives are used to reduce fear and anxiety.

Another important element in OST is crisis, or the occurrence of a moment that profoundly challenges state identities. Such self-identity threats occur when an unpredictable event affects a large number of individuals, and there is a perceived threat to the identity of a group or state (Steele 2008a: 12). The disruption of routines shakes long-held beliefs about oneself and rattles one's confidence in the system; disruptions create anxiety. States then activate familiar routines and biographical narratives in order to reduce anxiety among the state members (Mitzen 2006, 348; Subotic 2015: 5). Subconsciously rather than consciously, states draw on established routines to restore ontological security since routines are internalized and provide a feeling of continuity

(Mitzen 2006: 346f). Furthermore, to restore ontological security, events must be interpreted in a way that reinforces the state's sense of self. An international crisis thus needs to be imagined in a way that allows continuity of the state autobiography. This can induce state leaders to misinterpret a critical situation (Chernobrov 2016).

CASE STUDY “AMERICAN TORTURE” USING OST

In my MA thesis at Goethe University Frankfurt, I used the arguments outlined above to explain the paradox of American torture in the US-led War on Terror under George W. Bush, 2001-2006. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the Bush-administration had authorized the systematic use of torture on detainees in Afghanistan, Iraq, and at Guantánamo Bay (Danner 2004; Sikkink 2013). This was paradoxical to many scholars since 1) the USA had formally accepted and internalized the international prohibition of torture and 2) has long proclaimed the importance of protecting and promoting democracy and political rights (Ignatieff 2005; Sikkink 2013).

Constructivists argued that the USA violated the norm against torture because the norm had not been fully internalized (Sikkink 2013) or because the norm has been de-internalized (McKeown 2009). Although the basic ideas made sense, I found these explanations unsatisfying as they lacked depth. The constructivist explanations failed 1) to take into

account the significance of the terrorist attacks in 2001 for the violation of the norm against torture and 2) to grasp the specific processes at work that encourage non-compliance with the norm. OST can help fill those gaps because the theory focuses on the importance of crises, as well as the significance of routines and narratives in the reaction of a state to a crisis. In the case of American torture, it is vital to understand the terrorist attacks of 9/11 not merely as a physical security threat but also, and maybe more so, an ontological security threat.

The events of 9/11 challenged America's sense of being in the world by disrupting American routines and contesting American self-identity. After 9/11, the US government and the American people felt disconnected from reality; Americans' view of themselves and their position in the world suddenly clashed with the traumatizing reality of the large-scale attack on American soil. 9/11 challenged core notions that most Americans had about themselves and their identity as a people. Those are the notions of power, dominance, and strength that are inscribed in ideas such as American exceptionalism, manifest destiny, and the myth of American manhood. Hence, the United States felt ontologically insecure.

However, after 9/11, the USA also demonstrated a sense of agency and a longing to reduce this disconnection from reality. In an attempt to restore ontological security, the US government activated familiar narratives and routines,

constructing the threat of terrorism as a familiar one and returning to a conservative Cold War-like mode of foreign policy. With officials interpreting 9/11 and terrorism as a familiar threat similar to the threat posed by Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, the American people were provided with a sense of continuity of world affairs. Narratives of 'we against them', or 'good against evil', were employed to reinforce American self-identity. Foreign policy included proactive foreign aggression and policies from the toolbox of a realist. The use of torture was one of these policies. Torture served to repair the broken American self which had been injured in 9/11. Core notions of the US self (such as strength, masculinity, and superiority) were strengthened by the act of torture; thereby, the people's trust in the continuity of American self-identity post 9/11 was reinstated (Steele 2008b).

Hence, torture was used as a tool to restore ontological security among the American people. The significance of 9/11 lies in its power to challenge the American sense of being in the world, additionally to threatening the physical security of the nation. Routines (of a conservative, militaristic foreign policy) and narratives (of 'good vs. evil' and American exceptionalism) were activated by representatives of the US government to restore ontological security. This state behavior, motivated by ontological insecurity post 9/11, was highly destructive in terms of human rights as well as in terms of physical security. After all, the display of torture (as in photographs showing torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq)

was widely used by terrorists for recruitment purposes (Hajjar 2013: 59).

POTENTIAL AND LIMITATIONS OF THE THEORY

In my research, OST helped me gain new insights and explain a phenomenon that previously lacked in-depth explanations. In the case study of “American torture”, OST provides a new perspective on a much-debated phenomenon in international relations. When constructivist explanations of the use of torture in the War on Terror lacked depth, OST helped fill the gaps. The theory shed light on the meaning of 9/11 for the American people and the specific psychological reactions at work that favored the use of torture on detainees. 9/11 challenged not only American physical security but also, and maybe more so, American ontological security, i.e. the confidence that the American self will prevail in the world. With 9/11 leaving the American people ontologically insecure, the US government activated established narratives (good vs. evil, American exceptionalism) and routines (a militaristic, state-centric foreign policy using proactive aggression) in order to restore ontological security. Torture was one tool in the context of a conservative foreign policy, and helped (from the US perspective) to restore notions about American strength, masculinity, and dominance.

With its realist and constructivist elements, OST complements other theories of international relations. It

allows researchers to consider the significance of severe disruptions in world politics and the deep psychological processes that lead states to favor certain policies. OST also explains state behavior that seems irrational at first. In my case, the theory was able to shed light on the motivation of norm-violating state behavior. In general, OST has much potential for the study of international relations and scholars should further engage with it. However, as with most theories in IR, there are limits to the theory and its application in research.

I will outline two issues that were most challenging in my research with regard to OST. First, the concepts used in the theory are vague or even unclear. Since the theory is a rather new one in IR, there are still open questions about details of some concepts. For instance, scholars refer to the subject of ontological (in)security sometimes as individuals but other times as a people or a state. This is certainly problematic as it lacks specificity. Unfortunately, OST does not provide a clear definition of the subject of ontological (in)security. Scholars use all three categories. As far as I understand it, individuals, society, and government interact in the sense that they produce and reinforce narratives and routines that sustain the state self-identity. Therefore, in my MA thesis, I used the terms individuals, people, and government as subjects of ontological (in)security interchangeably most of the time.

Similarly, the concept of a state routine remains unclear. According to OST, states and individuals alike follow routines

for ontological security reasons. While individuals can easily think of several routines that they follow in their daily lives, it is more difficult to identify the routines of a state. Steele (2008a) argues that states follow established policies because they appear to create predictability, and provide a sense of trust in the world system (52). However, even when granting that routines are a state's domestic or foreign policies, how long does a state have to follow a certain policy for it to become a routine? Scholars of OST have not elaborated on what qualifies as a state routine. Unfortunately, my thesis lacked the scope to elaborate on the definition of a state routine. In my paper, I simply considered American routines the core notions, strategies, and paradigms that have dominated US foreign policy since World War II. Further work must be done on the core concepts of OST, and definitions should be clarified.

Second, the theory leads the researcher to work with general assumptions about a state or a group of people. For instance, in my work, I often referred to the American people as a homogenous group when I discussed reactions to 9/11, beliefs about American self-identity or attitudes towards torture. This is a simplification that reduced the validity of my argument. Certainly, not every American believes in American exceptionalism or the idea of American masculinity. Unfortunately, working with OST, it seems necessary to exclude diverse interpretations of the state self-identity. Due to the scope of my thesis, I had to concentrate on hegemonic

narratives and beliefs that dominate American politics, excluding minority views and counter-narratives.

CONCLUSION

While much work remains to be done on concepts and definitions, ontological security theory is a promising tool for scholars to understand world politics. The theory provides a new perspective on relevant issues such as seemingly irrational or norm-violating state behavior. If the reader was interested in engaging with the theory, they would probably like to start by reading Brent Steele's *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (Routledge 2008). For a more realist approach within the theory, or if one was interested in explaining conflict, one should take a look at Jennifer Mitzen's 2006 article "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma" and her 2011 article "Knowing the Unknown Unkonwns: Misplaced Certainty and the Onset of War". If one was interested in constructivist elements and engaging with discourse, inspecting Catarina Kinnvall's 2013 article "Trauma and the Politics of Fear: Europe at the Crossroads" and Jelena Subotic's 2015 article "Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change" is recommended.



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1. Mitzen (2006) provides the following definition of ontological security: "Ontological security is security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice" (344). Furthermore, Mitzen states that "ontological security refers to the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time – as being rather than constantly changing – in order to realize a sense of agency" (342). 
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